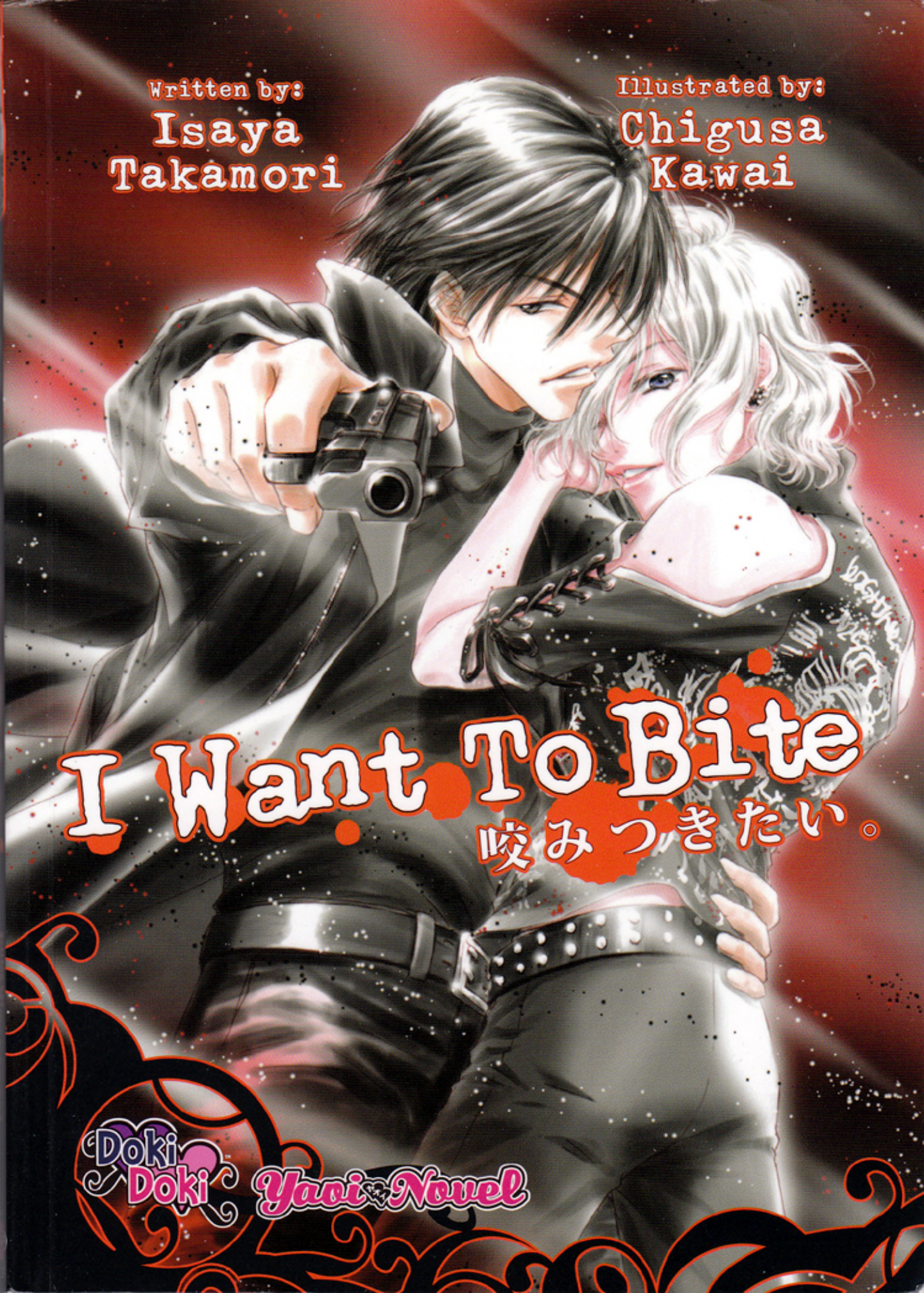


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Takamori**

Illustrated by:
**Chigusa
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I Want To Bite

咬みつきたい。

Doki
Doki

Yaoi Novel

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Their breaths grew ragged. Their mouths parted. Tristan whimpered, wanting more. The lascivious glow of his ruddy tongue and glistening lips made Isaac gasp for air before ferociously kissing him again. Desire outstripped feeling and emotion. The consequences be damned. Only the frenzy of the now mattered...

Isaac is a full-time college student and part-time nocturnal hunter of...vampires.

A contractor for the Helsing Group, Isaac's passion for his work is fueled by the tragedy in his past – as vampires had killed his family eight years ago.

Now the Helsing Group wants Isaac to go after the deadliest vampire sire of them all – Jado. But there's a catch. A comely and very male vampire, Tristan, who has the hots for Isaac, has volunteered his services to help Isaac take down Jado. What secret is Tristan hiding? And can Isaac withstand the onslaught of Tristan's desire for his body...and blood?

Come enter Isaya Takamori's world of sexy vampires and even sexier vampire hunters! Illustrated by Chigusa Kawai.



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Los Angeles

I Want To Bite

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I Want To Bite

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Prologue

Fright Night

Vivian's voice hummed through the headset pressed against his left ear. "*How are things looking on your end?*"

Isaac lowered his sunglasses and cast a sideways glance at the entrance to the nightclub with his sharp gray eyes. Patrons streamed in and out beneath the pink lights—lights shaped into gaudy bouquets of electric roses.

"The target just went in."

He spoke into the mic concealed in the raised collar of his coat. Leaning back against the grubby brick wall as if waiting for a friend to arrive, Isaac checked his watch. It was almost midnight. The time of day when the blood began to flow and *they* moved into high gear.

The rain had let up, but the air still felt like a wet blanket. A light breeze tainted with cheap tobacco and cheaper perfume caressed his cheeks. A clinging sense of unease made him frown to himself.

A woman was hanging out near the entranceway. She cast a meaningful look at him. He could tell at a glance that the short fur coat she was wearing was a knock-off. Lace garters peeked out from beneath her micro-mini skirt. A pair of hip-high patent leather boots rode up on a pair of well-proportioned legs. If she camped out there much longer, she could start getting in the way.

Vivian asked in a carefree voice, "*What's the name of this place?*"

"Rosebud. Does it have a crypt?"

He heard a rustling sound in the headset as Vivian went through her notes. She sighed, and he pictured the disappointed slant

of her eyebrows. *"Can't say. Not on the list. The nightclub's got a regular business license, nothing out of the ordinary. Just a sec, I'm checking the blueprints."*

The sound of her voice was replaced by the clicking of her keyboard. Isaac glanced again at his watch. Five minutes had passed since the target had gone inside.

"Isaac?"

"I hear you."

"We've got a problem. The establishment can be accessed from the other side of the street as well."

"Damn. I needed to know that five minutes ago!"

He bounced off the wall and set off with long strides. If he'd been spotted, the target could have already given him the slip. Isaac sighed reproachfully to himself and prayed they hadn't seen him.

The burly bouncer at the door gave Isaac a good looking over and told him the cover charge. Isaac didn't know if they had a dress code, or what passed for "appropriate." Though while he was waiting, he'd observed a couple of unnatural redheads in torn T-shirts and Mohawks, wearing studded boots that looked more like weapons, plenty of chains, and the occasional wild-eyed wack job—they all looked right at home.

By comparison, Isaac wore a black slicker, a black shirt with a collar that reached his chin, and black leather trousers. Not because he had a particular fondness for making fashion statements. The outfit was simple—no wondering what went with what. And it did go with his job.

His hair was black, too. But that color he was born with.

He paid the cover charge. Another big man who must've had a day job guarding the gates of Hell opened the door from the inside. Isaac removed his sunglasses and walked into the club.

The place was more packed than he'd anticipated. He wasn't surprised that there were two entrances. The music beat against his solar plexus. The pounding rhythm and the husky vocals blended with low laughter and the background noise. A rusty red and green

glow radiated through the swirling tobacco smoke above the dancing patrons.

Isaac carefully scanned the nightclub, his eyes sliding from one person to another. The face of his quarry jumped into his senses. Vampires operated on a different wavelength than normal humans, and with a bit of training, a hunter could learn how to recognize it.

"Confirmed," he murmured into the mic as he walked up to the bar.

The hubbub made it hard to hear anything. A finger tap on the mic and the noise compensation system kicked in.

Vivian's voice hiked up a few decibels. *"What's he doing?"*

"Dancing. Seems pretty laidback."

"This going to turn into another one of those long, drawn-out affairs?"

The wry way she said it made Isaac draw his brows together. Like she was talking about an overlong dinner party. He had a first-period class the next day and would prefer to wrap things up pronto.

Threading his way through the crowds, he muttered bluntly, "Wouldn't bet on it. When the symptoms present and the throat goes dry, it's impossible for them to hold it in."

"Yeah. The subtlety ends once things flare up. Take care you don't end up with another victim on your hands."

"You don't need to tell me. Just because you don't catch them in the act doesn't mean they've got their act together."

"Speaking of which, you dose up?"

"You think there's a chance of catching anything from this one? He's about as low on the totem pole as they get."

Vivian was surely shrugging her shoulders in response to this naked display of confidence. *"Don't get cocky. A cornered rat will bite the cat."*

"I know, I know."

At the bar, Isaac asked the sallow-cheeked barkeep, who wore a bow tie of course, for a beer. He turned his face to the side so the

headset wouldn't show. The barkeep didn't look to be in the best of health, but he wasn't one of *them*. The patrons mingling around the bar were all human, too.

So this wasn't a crib or a crypt after all. Whatever the reason, they didn't come here to meet with their sires. Just a familiar spot to quench the thirst.

Isaac retreated with his mug to a corner of the room. Not letting the target on the dance floor stray from the corner of his eyes, he sipped at the beer. That's when an odd feeling came over him. All of the patrons were male. The "women" were all men in drag. However expertly the makeup was applied, their chests were flat as pancakes. Even the "girl" in the hip-high patent leathers outside the club? Hard to believe, but possible.

He felt a pair of eyes upon him. A golden-haired kid about twenty or so—his own age—with a pierced nose checking him out. And not covertly either. Isaac turned as if to devote more care and attention to his beer. This place was creeping him out. He felt a cold trickle of sweat working its way down his back.

"Christ almighty."

"*What's that? You got yourself a crypt there, Isaac?*"

"Naw. This place is packed with gays, not vampires."

A beat. Then raucous laughter assaulted his ear. It took all of his self-control to keep from shouting back at her. "What's so funny?"

"*Well, it makes sense, seeing how it's called Rosebud. You'd better watch yourself, or they'll all be after your cute little one.*"

Isaac gritted his teeth. "Yeah, you're such a comedienne, Vivian."

He felt someone next to him. A beanpole of a kid was facing the bar with his elbows on the counter. His ears poked out of a mane of silver-gray hair. An earring in the shape of bat wings glimmered in the dull light. The kid turned around casually, showing the rest of his face. Isaac had never seen him before. From the other ear dangled a pair of rings.

Two big cat-like eyes—black or dark brown—peeped from between his longish bangs. When those eyes caught a flash of light, they gleamed like obsidian. He had to be around eighteen.

He was wearing a sheer black mesh vest over a red short-sleeved T-shirt. Long gloves without fingers. The shoulders of the vest weren't sewn together: the right shoulder was tied with a leather shoelace, the left with several safety pins.

He looked like any of the teenagers who could be spotted hanging out in this part of town, day or night. Except that his perfectly shaped features stood apart from the crowd. Though he was hardly "prettied up," he was clearly a cut above the others, for all their fastidious grooming.

In fact, as people passed by, there were not a few envious glares aimed in his direction. His was a countenance and a fashion sense that would be very much at home on any model or in any of the major style magazines.

The corners of his soft red lips dimpled quite naturally. A disarming smile rose to his mouth. It was the kind of smile that enchanted without effort, that caught the fish without ever revealing the line or the lure.

Isaac looked back at him blankly. "*Hello, hello,*" Vivian was saying in his headset. He suddenly came back to himself. *Quiet*, he signaled with a cough. The sound cut off. She could be a downright pain, but the woman knew when it was time to be discreet.

The kid examined Isaac with an intrigued expression. Isaac turned away and took a long drink. No matter how pretty he was, he was still a guy.

Nothing worth looking at.

It was weak beer. Flavored water. Isaac again knit his brows together. The kid let out an amused chuckle. "You here by yourself?" he asked, in a voice like soft velvet.

The kid was obviously cruising. Isaac put down the mug and said, not trying to be polite about it, "I'm waiting for somebody. *Piss off.*"

"Oh, you're not waiting for anybody. More like you're keeping an eye out for somebody," he said in an aloof, knowing manner. He leaned back against the bar. Isaac's eyes widened a bit, despite himself. And the kid's eyes narrowed like those of a cat curling up in a patch of sunlight. "A single guy stands out in a place like this, don't you know. You're a fresh face. And not an off-putting one at that. The sharks are waiting for a chance to strike. Hard to make a move when all eyes are on you. I wouldn't want to see things get out of hand."

He spoke breezily, as if he knew the place like the back of his hand. Perhaps he was a vampire too. A minion? A capo? A sire? Running interference for the others by getting in his way and slowing him up? He scoped the kid out, but couldn't come to any firm conclusions. He detected none of the bottomless thirst that typified the minions and servants—that hunger to die for.

"What are you driving at?" he said in a low, intimidating voice.

The kid wasn't cowed in the least. He smiled sweetly. "Oh, nothing. Just hitting on you. Just like you thought all along."

"Not interested in guys like that. I'm here on business."

"So why not be a good soldier and soldier on anyway?"

He grabbed Isaac by the arm and dragged him along to the dance floor. Isaac muffled a violent shout. "Hey, I told you to piss off!"

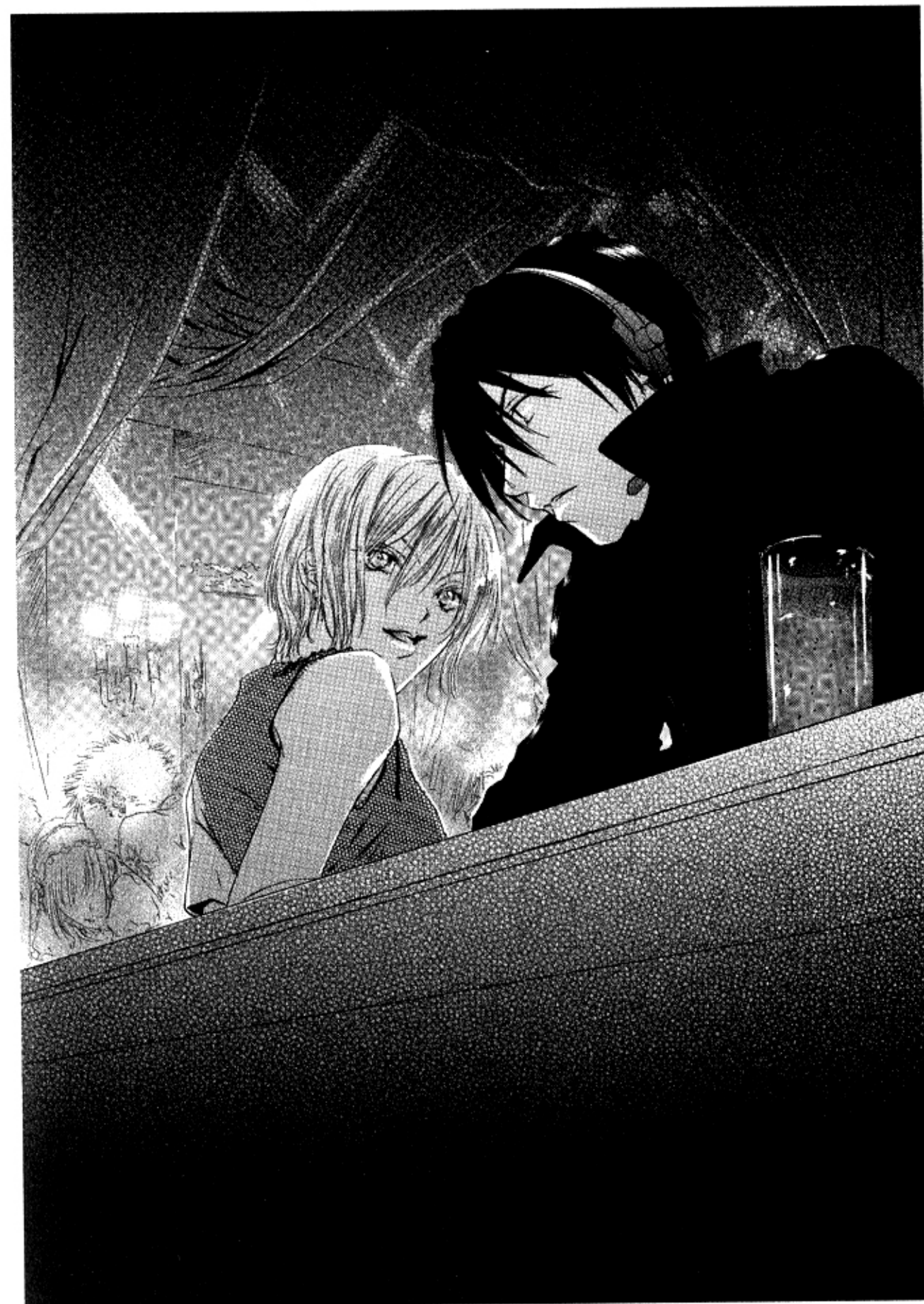
"I'm only trying to cooperate. Look at things from my perspective."

They mixed in with the other couples dancing to the relaxed rhythm. The kid faced Isaac and put his arm around his waist, pressing his body closer.

"What the—"

"Keep looking in that direction," he whispered.

Isaac raised his eyes. And saw his target among several other couples. He was murmuring in his partner's ear, laughing and sharing a private, humorous moment.



"What makes you think I came here to check him out?"

"But you *were* checking him out, weren't you? Hard to miss with that dangerous glint in your eyes."

Isaac *tsked* to himself and reluctantly put his arms around the kid. *Shit. What the hell am I doing, feeling up another guy for?* Now, a hot chick like Vivian and he'd call it a perk.

"Hold me tighter. Look at me. Keep staring like that and you'll give yourself away."

Isaac cursed silently and sighed deeply. But he did as he was told. *When in Rome*—he copied the behavior of the others around him. Nobody on the dance floor was spying on anybody else.

The target was making a hot and heavy play for his partner, indicating the other exit with his eyes and then drawing closer, cheek to cheek, murmuring sweet nothings. Coaxing him into leaving together.

Isaac was so focused on the little melodrama playing out on the dance floor that he barely noticed when the kid raised his face from his chest, and pressed his lips against the nape of his neck.

The negotiations looked to be drawing to a conclusion. Leaning against each other, the two left the dance floor. Isaac drew in a breath and started after them. The kid held him back with unexpectedly strong arms.

"Hey, let go. I owe you one. I'll thank you later."

"I'll make you," the kid said softly, hugging Isaac's tall frame.

Isaac squirmed reflexively in his grasp. He cast a sideways glance at his quarry. The target was urging on his "date" while repeatedly scanning his surroundings—double-checking to make sure he wasn't being tailed.

Held back against his will until they were clean out of sight, the exasperated Isaac made a mad dash for the other exit. Facing the street opposite, it was narrower and devoid of patrons.

He scrambled up to street level. The quarry had vanished. The illumination from the streetlights dotted the road, the flickering glow

reflecting in pools of water. The beams from car headlamps flowed down the asphalt from an intersection further on.

"Damn! Where'd they go?"

"That way."

Isaac whirled around.

The kid grinned and gestured with his right hand. "The boy he took with him hangs out around here a lot. He takes his tricks two blocks over and earns a little pocket change. It's a dead end. Nobody goes there."

Isaac didn't pause to thank him, but took off running. Passing the first block, a quick sideways look from the bustling main street presented him with a view like peering through an unlit tunnel. Entering the second block alleyway, he flattened himself against the wall and listened closely. The rustling of clothing and muffled voices reached his ears.

"Not so fast. No need to rush things."

The protest was met with no answer, only the raw, ragged, growling respiration echoing through the darkness. Isaac pulled his gun from the holster under his arm. He steadied his own breath, jumped out and took aim.

"Freeze!"

All movement obediently came to a halt. The eye of the face in profile glowered at him, glittering red in the pitch black. Keeping the gun leveled on him, Isaac carefully stepped forward.

"Let him go."

"Hey, no need to interfere. Everything's consensual."

"You might rethink that consent knowing his true colors."

"True colors?" said the hustler, turning around. His eyes went wide. He let out a yelp. The dim glow from the streetlights and the light of the moon was enough. Two long canines poked out from the man's lips. The blood-filled eyes burned like the fires of hell.

The man seized the hustler and threw him at Isaac. Isaac didn't make the slightest effort to break his fall. The hustler tumbled to the ground with a grunt.

"Here—" Isaac said, tossing a small silver crucifix at him. He took off after the vampire.

The vampire ran in the opposite direction of the main street. Perhaps he didn't know this was a dead end. Isaac cornered him against the back wall of the alley. The smooth brick surface presented no obvious handholds. The vampire hesitated for only a second. Then dug his sharp fingernails into the mortar joints and started climbing.

Isaac scowled and again drew aim. "This one's the real thing," he said under his breath, and pulled the trigger. Three arrow-point, hawthorn wood bullets thudded into the vampire's back.

He slammed down onto the ground, screaming and writhing. The hawthorn bush belonged to the rose family, highly allergic to vampires. Even a single hit by a small bullet made from hawthorn wood was crippling.

Isaac switched the gun to his left hand, and took out a small flashlight and pointed it at the vampire. The blue light struck his face. He bellowed and rolled over.

"Stop! Stop it please!"

"Bingo," Isaac said. "Positive for ultraviolet light. Hawthorn, too. Visible morphology shows elongated canines. Blood-red eyes and claw-like nails. That enough, Vivian?"

"Check him against a crucifix," Vivian said through the headset, as if she was checking off a list, which she probably was.

Isaac shrugged. He took a cross from his pocket and tossed it onto the man's back, who unleashed an unearthly howl. His back bent backwards. His limbs went stiff.

"That's a positive."

"Okay. A bad reaction to ultraviolet light and a crucifix is only the first step. If we're lucky, a recovery may be possible."

"I wouldn't be so sure," Isaac replied in disinterested tones. He gave the man a light kick. Still locked in a kind of rigor mortis, the body twitched and spasmed.

"I've confirmed your position. The cops should be there

presently. Keep an eye out."

"Got it. You, stop right there."

The teenage hustler that had accompanied the man was trying to sneak out of the alleyway. Isaac pointed his gun at him and he froze in place.

"Hey, I'm no vampire. He didn't bite me. C'mon, let me go home."

"No way. First, you get checked out at the hospital. You even got a scratch on you, you gotta get vaccinated. Your duty as a citizen and all."

"I'm telling you, nobody bit me!"

"It can happen without you even knowing it. Vampire fangs are sharp. They've got paralytics in their saliva to boot. You want to turn out like this guy?"

Isaac shone the ultraviolet penlight on the back of the man's neck. His eyes bugged out and he threw his head back with a shriek.

"Jesus, there's smoke coming out of his head!"

"Oops."

Isaac switched off the penlight. Get carried away and he'd catch hell from the professors afterwards. A small camera mounted in his headset recorded everything.

"Sit down over there. Run away and I'll shoot you. I don't need to tell you, but I'm a licensed hunter. It'd be within my rights."

"I figured," the teenager answered glumly. He leaned against a discarded wooden crate. The sound of approaching sirens echoed through the night sky.

Having handed things over to the cops, Isaac left the scene. He signed off with Vivian, switched off the headset and stretched languorously.

He'd been going on hunting assignments practically every day

for the last couple of weeks. The work was taking its toll. A good thing this night's quarry hadn't been all that experienced. There was no way he could count on taking them all down this easily.

He considered stopping at a local watering hole for a nightcap. Though on second thought, not with class first thing in the morning. He checked his watch. Two o'clock in the morning. The busses had already stopped running.

Yeah, not worth it. He might as well hail a taxi and call it a night. *Stick to necessary expenses.* The rule was practically etched into his brain.

He'd set off walking when a face suddenly popped up out of nowhere. He reflexively jumped backwards. Somebody had swung upside down from the railing of the fire escape. The smiling face disappeared a moment later. Before he knew it, the skinny kid was standing on the landing.

The same kid he'd met in the nightclub earlier in the evening. He leaned over the railing and peered down at Isaac like a mischievous cat.

"You said you'd make it up to me later."

Isaac had completely forgotten. He sighed. "Sure. You can have one on me. Anywhere but *that* place."

"A little late to go drinking, don't you think?"

"What, you're hungry?"

Isaac looked up at the kid and froze in his tracks. The kid grinned suggestively. A pair of pointed fangs peeked out from his lips. Isaac reached for his gun. But the kid was already gone, along with the metallic sound of feet running over the rusty metal fire escape. Gun in hand, Isaac vaulted over the railing and charged after him.

The roof of the old, broken-down building—only a few stories high—was an island wasteland. It didn't look like anybody lived in the place, with tangled clotheslines and rusted antennas and pieces of brick all strewn about.

The roof was lit only by the cold light from the distant

buildings and fragments of moonlight. His gun ready, Isaac searched his surroundings. The place was as silent as a cemetery. Not even an inkling or a vibe.

If the kid really was a vampire and Isaac couldn't sniff him out after being that close, he must be one hell of a vampire. No minion. Not even a mere capo. Higher up on the food chain than Isaac had ever encountered.

The roof was home to a dilapidated penthouse. Hearing a faint sound, Isaac glued himself to the wall. He walked softly. Leading with his gun, he darted around the corner. A small black animal rabbited away.

"Hoh, it's just a pussy cat."

Isaac whirled around. The kid was standing right in front of him. His eyes looked straight into Isaac's. In a flash, as if those eyes had shot out an invisible spider's web, Isaac found himself unable to move.

The kid half-closed his magnetic eyes and smiled languidly. Moonlight reflected off his black pupils. Staring into those eyes was like standing on the edge of an abyss.

He stroked the cheek of the paralyzed Isaac. A long, slender, elegant finger. The nails were the color of mother of pearl, ever so slightly pink, like a drop of blood in a glass of milk.

"You let down your guard," he murmured into Isaac's ear. His lips brushed Isaac's, sending a tremulous sensation shooting through him. The kid took the gun from Isaac's rigid hand. "How about that. Converted to full auto. How convenient. Used to be revolvers and handmade bullets."

"Because—you've been—multiplying like rabbits—of late."

Isaac wrung the words out of himself with as much sarcasm as he could muster. The kid only smiled serenely and chuckled in rather chilling tones.

Shit. This is one bad-ass vampire.

The kid's eyes cast off an eerie light, like moonlight reflecting off a still lake. With a bright grin that practically made Isaac squint,

he purposefully traced the line of Isaac's lips with the tip of his tongue. Isaac gritted his teeth together. His brain couldn't decide whether the sensation was pleasant or disgusting.

At the same time, he felt the barrel of his gun twisting around in his hand to point at his temple. He heard the click of the safety releasing. The gun wasn't loaded with lead. At this range though, the impact alone would cause near fatal brain damage.

He reluctantly opened his mouth. He wasn't in the mood to get killed by his own gun. With his finger on the trigger, the vampire kid thrust his tongue into Isaac's mouth, entwining it around his own.

A tingling sensation crept through his flesh. Isaac recalled what he'd told the teenage hustler—that vampire saliva contained a kind of narcotic. It numbed the pain and triggered the release of endorphins. Worse, it stimulated and amplified the sexual response. Vampires weren't disposed to let such effects go to waste.

While persistently assaulting the inside of Isaac's mouth, the vampire kid pressed his leg between Isaac's legs and began slowly undulating his thigh, keenly arousing the most sensitive parts of his torso.

Isaac's reflexively opened his eyes wide.

The bastard's playing with me.

He tried to kick back and retreat, but the gun barrel was pressed tightly against his head and he couldn't move his frozen limbs. He considered biting the kid's tongue. Except that would release his tainted blood and he could end up swallowing it. The thought was enough to make his skin crawl.

Isaac steeled his nerves and endured it the best he could. Vampires often toyed with their prey. They never doubted their own powers. That arrogance presented the only opening for a counterattack.

The kid finally pulled his mouth away. A thread of saliva still connected them. He licked his damp lips and smiled coquettishly. Isaac didn't go for guys that way. But that smile and those glistening

lips possessed a strangely tempting allure that was hard to resist.

The kid nipped at his neck, trailing his tongue along his skin. It was very much like getting swabbed with a sterilizing cotton swab before an injection—for Isaac, not a fond sense memory.

"Hey, a friendly warning. I just got my evening vaccine injection. You'd better lay off unless you want to go into shock."

The kid raised his head. His expression barely changed at all. He grinned and his cheeks dimpled. "You got an injection to hunt down a punk like that? Pretty lame excuse for an official hunter licensed by the Helsing Group."

"I like being careful."

"Didn't you have a beer earlier?" The kid smirked and buried his face against Isaac's neck. "The G vaccine is contraindicated for alcohol. A drop of booze, and for you it'd be like downing a fifth of vodka. Until the vaccine wears off, drinking is strictly forbidden. A veteran hunter would surely know that."

He looked up again and kissed Isaac long and slow. With Isaac holding his breath, he gently removed the gun from his temple. Instead of tossing it aside, the kid clicked on the safety and tucked it back into the holster beneath his arm.

The kid eyed the surprised Isaac, and smiled the smile of an incorrigible cat.

"That was really tasty. Alas, no matter how you look at it, a hunter sporting a hickey from a vampire—how embarrassing would that be? I do feel sorry for you, so I'll cut you some slack. Instead—"

He hooked his fingers through Isaac's belt buckle. Before Isaac could guess what was coming next, the buckle was undone and his trousers and undershorts were down to his knees. No sooner had he felt the cool night breeze on his skin, when the kid's hot mouth closed around him.

Isaac gaped in surprise. In the first instance, he couldn't grasp what was going on. A shock of pleasure raced up his spine—so intense it was almost painful. In the second, he realized the kid was

going down on him.

"Knock—knock it off!" he shouted in a ragged voice that sounded wretched even to him.

His arms and legs might as well have been pinned to the wall. He could only move the tips of his fingers. In that case, better that his nervous system be anesthetized as well. Perhaps due to the properties of the saliva, the pleasure signals came through so loud and clear that they drowned out what had come before.

The kid knelt in front of Isaac and leaned in, his hands planted on the wall behind him, his face in Isaac's groin. He thrust forward, taking his entire length into his mouth. And then out. Caressing the tip with his wet lips and tongue. Now and then grazing him with his teeth, sending a sharp, numbing tingle through his loins.

In a daze, Isaac tried to quell his erection. But achieved only the opposite, dragging out the pleasure. A kind of torture almost. He should've surrendered to the inevitable, but the dribs and drabs that remained of his pride wouldn't allow it.

Perhaps aware of the discord in his mind, the kid didn't make him come all at once. Like a hungry dog chowing down on a big bone and doing his best to make it last the longest—with great enthusiasm and yet a modicum of self-control—he devoted himself to the meal.

He glanced up at Isaac. Their eyes met. Looking down at the vampire, who had a slight smile on his face and his erection in his mouth, filled Isaac with a deep sense of loathing. With a glance at Isaac's countenance, red with rage, the kid redoubled his erotic efforts.

The irresistible pleasure coursing through him, Isaac threw back his head. His knees trembled. Unable to withstand the intoxicating tidal wave, he ejaculated into the kid's mouth. His hips surged forward of their own accord as he emptied himself. And—a bit impatiently, it seemed—the kid swallowed it down.

Isaac heard the echoes of his own panting breath. His head began to clear. He tried moving his fingers, but the ties still bound

him. As Isaac struggled to break the spell one way or the other, without being asked, the kid gallantly straightened his clothing. He then got to his feet, licked his moist mouth and laughed gaily.

"Good job. Very much appreciated."

Isaac felt like his head was going to explode. The kid paid his feelings no mind and kissed him with a faint smooching sound. The raw, musky smell of sex only worsened his mood. The kid eyed him slyly as he caressed his cheek with his finger.

With a last, fading smile, the kid began to retreat. "Good night, sleep tight, Isaac."

Startled, Isaac called out, "How do you know my name?"

The kid didn't reply. He stood on the edge of the roof—no railing or fence surrounding it—and snapped his fingers. The force holding Isaac dissolved. The sudden surge of his own energy made him stumble forward and almost fall. He regained his footing and drew his gun and started shooting.

His aim was true, but the kid skipped easily around the shots, not once losing his precarious balance. He calmly folded his arms and glanced over his shoulder and grinned.

Isaac steadied his arm and lined up the sights. "Answer me. How do you know my name?"

But the kid only danced along the ledge, with that cryptic smile on his face. Gracefully arching his back, he whispered, "Later—"

He dove backwards into the darkness, as if in slow motion, and disappeared from view.

Isaac ran up to the ledge, knelt down and peered over the edge. The street below was devoid even of shadows. He heard what he was sure were faint echoes of laughter.

Isaac got to his feet and cursed to himself. He kicked a loose brick at his feet. He couldn't fucking believe what had just happened. Getting treated like *this* by a scrawny-looking vampire like *that*. Like a kitten having fun with a mouse.

"Shit. *Later*, huh? Next time I'm going to shoot the little bastard!"

The boastful threat drifted on the damp breeze and vanished uselessly into the canyons between the buildings.

Chapter One

The Fearless Vampire Killers

Nobody knew who'd first named it, but the city was called "New Babylon."

Here the nouveau riche in their ultra-modern skyscrapers lived in spitting distance of the abandoned apartment blocks occupied by illegal immigrants, while middle-class housing reached out randomly toward the suburbs. A chaotic jumble of a city, where landfills and flower gardens sat cheek to jowl, and everybody got on together as nicely as a bunch of junkyard dogs.

The interplay of virtue and vice was as mixed up as the architecture—as mixed up as the balance between wealth and poverty, rich and poor—as mixed up as the citizenry themselves. According to the most recent official statistics, *homo sapiens* comprised ninety percent of the population. The other ten percent was officially God-only-knows.

The exact makeup of the human portion wasn't tracked closely, but most were the product of interracial unions. Asian, African, Anglo-Saxon—all were part of the mix.

As for the non-humans, eighty percent were vampires. The werewolves and ghouls were classified as "failed vampires" due to some sort of innate incompatibility with the human host. And so the balance of power came down to a contest between human and vampire, like something out of a B-grade horror flick.

For the time being, humans enjoyed superiority through sheer numbers. Though everybody knew that numbers didn't always count when push came to the shove of a pure power play.

At some point in recent history, the vampires had planted their roots deep into the underbelly of New Babylon society and were

sending their tentacles into the legitimate political and economic world.

The godfathers of the local mafia had established ties with the vampires and their broods. And a good many vampires had gotten comfortable passing as human in the top echelons of human society.

At any rate, veteran vampires could freely move about in sunlight and did not react to crucifixes. They still showed no image in a mirror and didn't cast a shadow. As long as they didn't laugh too loudly or show their teeth, their fangs barely showed at all.

To make matters worse, the elite vampires—men and women alike—had a certain *charm* about them. They could fool the average human. Mesmerized admirers and hangers-on looking to gobble up the crumbs from the table were as thick on the ground as cockroaches. With no shortage of ass-kissers eager to cover their tracks, the vampires could pretty much do as they pleased.

Thanks to this golden ticket to sin city, public morals went to hell in a handbasket, while the crime rate went through the roof and the arrest rate went nowhere.

The heads of the departments of public health and safety spun their wheels and passed the buck. The health department had its hands full treating infected humans. The cops were busy enough dealing with the full panoply of ordinary human crime. The whole thing was about to burst.

And that was where the hunters came in.

Vampire hunters are officially licensed and commissioned civilian volunteers to investigate vampire-caused assaults and murders and prevent the same.

That was the concept as enacted into law. In reality, it was a fig leaf.

Hunters were ostensibly members of the Helsing Group NGO

(named for Professor Abraham Van Helsing, the vampire hunter made famous in Bram Stoker's account). The Helsing Group was responsible for hunter training and management. However, once licensed and after a few assignments, the majority set up shop as independent contractors.

These freelance hunters snatched up commissions before they officially made it to Helsing proper. They cut private deals on the side for a share of the reward money. There were plenty of leakers and snitches selling intel on the black market.

As a result, the Helsing Group had become little more than a licensing board. Its original charter was as a think tank to investigate vampire culture and society. As it held the patents on anti-vampire vaccines, for the time being, it had no worries about keeping its endowment well funded.

Nevertheless, there was nothing unique about the hunters formally attached to the organization. And in fact, they presently had just one hunter that could be honestly classified as "active." He was working enough overtime to violate every labor regulation in the book. Not to mention he was getting paid peanuts for the trouble, and going to college on top of that.

But there was only one question on his mind right now: "So why's it *me* getting fucked over by some *guy* vampire?"

"Quit being so damned depressing already!" Vivian gave his chair a hard kick. Isaac groaned, his forehead pressed against the surface of the big desk. "If you want to sleep, do it in the break room. This is the operations room. You're killing the troop morale around here."

"The troop morale—" Still face down on the desk, Isaac rolled his eyes.

"Who the hell else is there?" He felt a hard tug on his earlobe. "Ouch!"

"I'm talking about *my* morale!"

"I'm up, I'm up, okay? You don't have to get testy about it."

Isaac sighed and straightened his chair, and looked up at the striking but imposing-looking woman, standing there with a hand on her hip and a frown on her face.

Vivian was his operations manager at the Helsing Group. She cut one helluva fine figure. Just standing there, she made anybody look twice. She was almost five-foot-eleven, with well-coiffed chestnut hair and remarkable cobalt-blue eyes. Her slightly large mouth and boldly-lined brows conveyed a sense of conviction and strength. In fact, she was a bit of a bitch.

A corset accentuated her hourglass figure and plunging décolletage. She wore her slacks tight enough to look painted on. The dimensions of her shapely legs didn't require much guessing. It was hard to say whether the total package constituted eye candy or a workplace hazard.

Thankfully, Isaac dealt with her mostly via his headset. It'd be hard for a strapping young man to keep his wits about him otherwise.

Vivian glared at Isaac, who was grumbling and rubbing his temples. "What's with the attitude? When you ask a favor of someone, a little gratitude is in order."

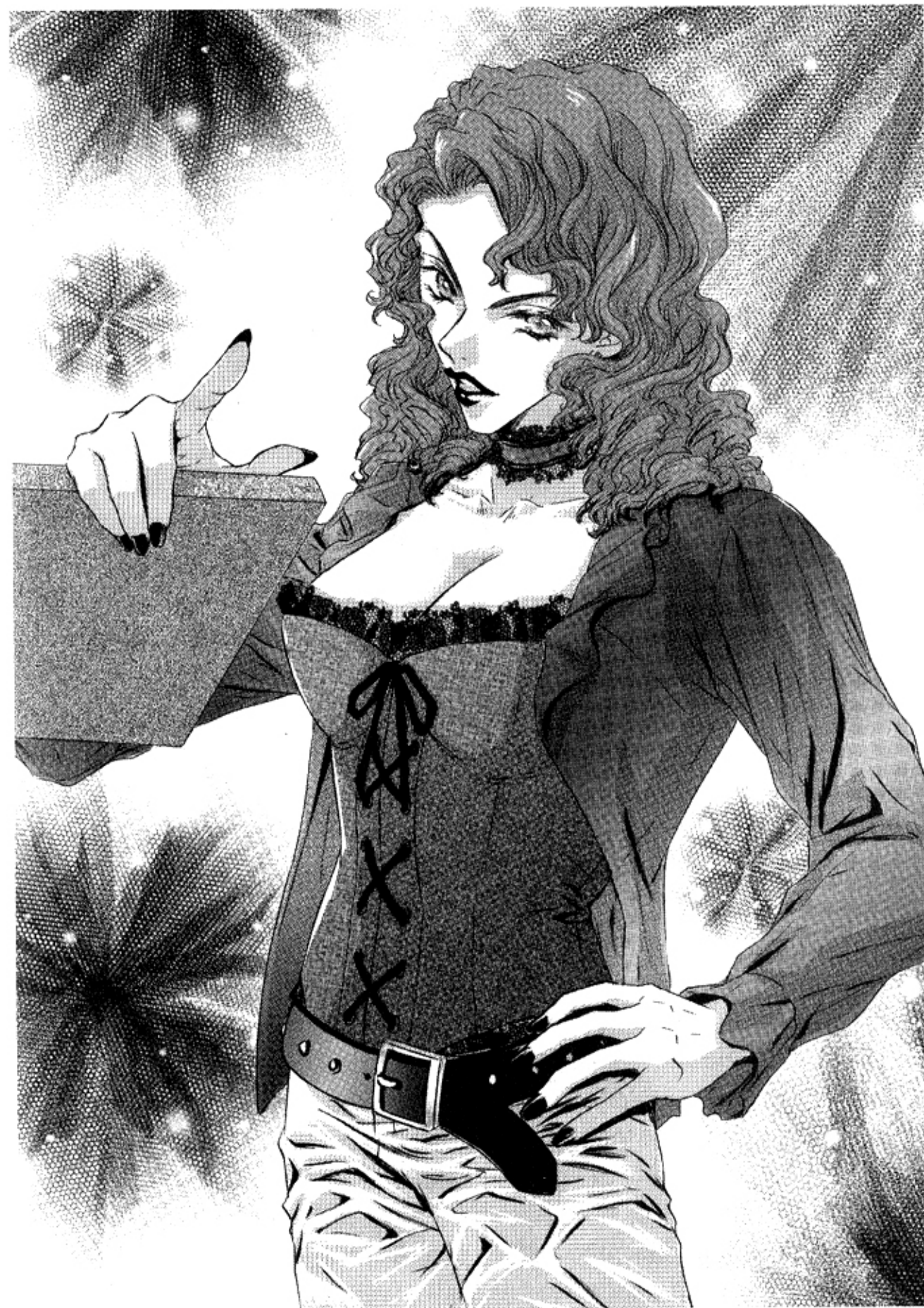
Isaac stretched his back. "What did you find out?"

Vivian's pretty red lips parted in a grin. "Not a thing."

"Son of a bitch!"

Vivian sniffed reproachfully at the reaction, and swaggered nonchalantly back to her desk and busied herself at her computer keyboard. "Your intel was so vague as to be worthless. All we got is a sex of male, height of about five-seven, thin frame, and age of seventeen or eighteen. Silver-gray hair, eyes black or dark brown. No name, and the description you gave our sketch artist didn't turn up any hits."

"There's got to be some security footage. I met him during last night's hunt at that gay bar."



"It's a gay *nightclub*."

"Like the difference matters to me. The kid got all friendly and hauled me onto the dance floor. He should have been dead center in my headset camera."

"I'm telling you, we got nothing."

"How could that be?"

Vivian typed some more and clicked around with the mouse. A camera file came up showing the dim interior of the nightclub. A bit of tweaking minimized the body movements and stabilized the frame.

"You can definitely tell you're dancing with somebody. See—"

With the mouse, Vivian dragged the image larger. The shapes and forms on the screen only grew less distinct. A human form could be made out, but there was no way to make out the facial features and clothing.

"The voice is weird too. Static in all the conversations. It's impossible to make out anybody's but yours. Our best signal analysis tools didn't yield any better results."

Vivian wheeled her chair around and looked up at the speechless Isaac.

"This is what it comes down to—that kid is definitely a vampire. And in a completely different league than the one you were hunting."

"Completely different league? How can you be so sure?"

"The only vampires that can screw up our recording equipment like that are direct lineal descendants, second generation and above. It'd never happen with run-of-the-mill minions and slaves."

"That sure wasn't the way he looked."

"You judge vampires by their looks?"

"No, but—"

If the kid really was that big of a big shot, he could have killed him without a second thought. Even dropping his guard for a split second was all he needed to bind him hand and foot. He knew that

Isaac hadn't been vaccinated recently. And yet, without taking his blood, the kid frenched him and—a bunch of other shit.

A vampire with a real perverse streak.

"You get played?"

"What was that?"

"Oh, nothing."

Isaac ignored the suspicious look on Vivian's face and returned to his oversized desk. "How about coffee?"

"If you don't mind instant, there's some over there. Make me some while you're at it."

"Sure."

Isaac went over and scooped a tablespoon from the big canister into a mug, added hot water from the electric pot, and handed it to Vivian. Vivian sat on the folding chair next to Isaac.

"So, something happen between you and the kid?"

"Nothing in particular."

"Ah, I get it. He came onto you hot and heavy, huh?"

Isaac spit out a mouthful of coffee. Vivian shrieked. "Hey, watch it! This outfit is brand new!"

"Then don't just go tossing out remarks like that!"

"Man, you've got no sense of humor. Everybody knows that vampires have tons of sex appeal. The more powerful, the more beautiful and alluring. He really yanked your chain, huh? Popped your pretty little cherry?"

"He didn't pop anything! Give it a break!"

"Ooh, scary. Hey, I'm not casting aspersions either way. My roommate plays for the home team, too."

"Oh yeah, that gorilla of a tranny."

"Don't be mean. Sure, he's a sight from the outside. But cuddly as a lamb underneath. Getting back to the subject, you're saying that kid knew your name?"

"Yeah."

"Probably means he's had his eye on you for some time now."

"C'mon, let's stop going there!" The exasperated Isaac wrapped his arms around his throbbing head.

"A rare chance, don't you think? It's tough getting hold of reliable vampire informants these days. The poor professors are scraping the bottle of the barrel. Next time you two meet, whisper sweet nothings in his ear and drag him down here."

Vivian's teasing was getting Isaac ticked off. He shouted, "Why the hell would I come on to a vampire!"

"Hmm. Good point. I can't really see you playing the Lothario in any case."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Whoa, it's almost sundown. You'd better get going."

"I'm off tonight."

Vivian took the empty mug from an exasperated Isaac. "The Group takes infection prevention activities very seriously. The crypts have been moving around a lot recently. Our old lists are practically useless. It's your job to go find them."

"*Your job to go find them*, she says. How many bars, dives and nightclubs do you think there are in this city?"

"Well, that's what informants are for. That's what your expense account is for. Shoo, shoo."

Evicted from the operations room, Isaac trudged down the hallway. Vivian stuck her head out of the door behind him and called out, "Oh, yeah. I wired the college your tuition."

When Isaac stepped outside, the sky visible between the spires of the skyscrapers was growing dark. The streetlights were coming on, along with the headlamps of the cars along the motorways. He had to get something to eat first. He stopped by an affordable place he frequented and ordered the Salisbury steak with garlic sauce.

He grabbed the evening edition off the rack. As was his habit, he checked the police blotter first. He sensed somebody taking the

seat opposite. When he looked up, across the table from him was the vampire from the night before.

Isaac jumped to his feet, smacking his knee against the bottom of the table. He let out a yelp.

"You okay?"

The kid wasn't laughing. He really looked concerned. Isaac automatically reached for his gun, only to remember he wasn't packing heat. The Helsing Group didn't let hunters carry off duty.

Instead, he grabbed his ultraviolet penlight and flicked it on. The kid waved his hand back and forth in front of his face, as if batting away an annoying fly. "Pointing that thing in your eye isn't healthy for humans either."

"Doesn't bother you?"

"Fortunately, no."

The kid grinned. He seemed in a more sober mood than the night before. Though he was wearing the same black gothic outfit. More than a real vampire, he came across as one of those wannabe vampire freaks. The silver-gray hair didn't look that out of place either.

Wait, what the hell am I thinking shit like that for? Isaac swore to himself. He didn't have time to think up an answer.

The all-too-laidback waitress appeared, snapped her gum and said, "Ready to order?"

"I'll have coffee," the kid said courteously.

The waitress started a bit, and blinked several times. Lowering her voice, she said, "Frankly, the coffee in this place is about as good as drinking out of a urinal."

"Ah. Well, in that case, a ginger ale."

The waitress smiled and returned to the galley.

"She never said that to me."

"What?"

"That the coffee here's no better than piss."

"Because you're always drinking it, right?"

Isaac wasn't in the mood to read anything into the kid's

repartee, other than it sounded like he was making fun of his palate. The waitress soon returned with a bottle of ginger ale and a glass.

"Thank you," the kid said with a coy glance.

The waitress flushed a bit and giggled girlishly as she left.

"How long do you plan on keeping up this act?"

"Eh? What?"

The kid cocked his head to the side. He pulled off the paper covering the straw. At first glance, he looked like any other street kid hanging out on the corner. He still carried a schoolboy's naïveté about him. Aside from a peek at his sharp canines when he laughed, there was nothing about him that said "vampire."

"Nothing."

The kid smiled and sipped at the ginger ale.

"Just so you know, I'm not paying for that."

"That's fine," the kid answered with a wry wink.

"What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to see you." He added, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world, "I said so last night. Have you forgotten already?"

"I didn't forget. And I sure as hell *want* to."

Last night, Isaac had sworn to knock his block off. He'd been in anything but a good mood at the time.

"What, it wasn't good for you?"

"You little bastard—" Isaac growled reflexively.

Just then, the plate was set on the table with a *thunk*. The waitress said, "Salisbury steak with garlic sauce. And a coffee. Anything else?"

"Uh, no."

"Enjoy yourselves."

The odor of the garlic wafted up. The kid smirked.

"You want a bite?"

"Oh, I shouldn't want to on principle."

Isaac wasn't sure why he answered *that* way, but it made him feel a bit self-conscious. He silently began to eat.

With something of a longing look, the kid examined his plate and said, "I used to like it quite a bit, garlic. Can't eat it now."

"Your kind gets used to ultraviolet the more years you put on. Why not garlic?"

"The smell, yes. Eating, no. No matter how many centuries pass."

"How old are you anyway?"

"A hundred sixteen," he said without hesitation.

Isaac arched his eyebrows. "You gotta be kidding."

"It's the truth. I was brought into the brood when I was seventeen. It's been ninety-nine years since."

Isaac stared long and hard at the kid. He knew that looks were no way to judge a vampire. But even this was hard to believe. Not a wrinkle, not a blemish marred the silky, vivacious cheeks. He was suddenly seized by the urge to stroke them. He hurriedly returned his attention to his meal.

He finished too quickly to really remember what it tasted like and washed it down with a glass of lukewarm tap water. The waitress got the plate and refilled the coffee cup. It tasted less like piss than muddy water. But now that he thought about it, the instant stuff at Helsing headquarters was better.

"So what are you here for?"

"Didn't I say? To see you."

"Enough with the fucking mind games," Isaac said in a low, rough voice. His attempt at intimidation had no effect.

The kid smiled serenely. "Not a game. I was asking for a job."

"Huh?" Isaac said dubiously.

"You couldn't use a little help?"

"No."

The kid looked at him from beneath his brows.

"At least think it over."

"No means no."

The kid wasn't backing down. "The Helsing Group hardly has

a surplus of hunters these days. And not only are they shorthanded, but most of the rest are on medical leave. I'm willing to pitch in and help. I promise you, I *can* be very helpful."

"Listen, you—"

"Tristan."

"What?"

The kid grinned. "My name is Tristan, Isaac."

"Whatever. Why would a vampire want to join forces with a vampire hunter?"

"You already have collaborators, do you not?"

"Half-blood vampires. Not like you. You are different. We couldn't capture anything about you on our equipment. That makes you upper echelon."

"Well. I don't need to tell you, but I didn't become a vampire because I wanted to. I'd think someone in your position would get that."

"They all say that when we catch them. They didn't want to become vampires, but once they do, they say how it's really not so bad after all."

"Isn't so bad?" Tristan eyed Isaac quietly. His smile disappeared and a sharp expression rose to his face. "No joke. Dying would be better."

Isaac was momentarily at a loss for words. A moment later, the affable smile again rose to Tristan's lips. "I'm sure you could use the help. It must be tough going solo. And attending college on top of that. If you keep skipping classes, you're going to have to start repeating courses."

"How the hell do you know my attendance record?"

"Oh, I asked around. Studying you has become my hobby of late."

"You a stalker?"

Tristan cupped his chin in his hand and said coyly, "You know, I could—were you to prove disagreeable."

Isaac groaned. He felt a bit of vertigo. A gay vampire stalker—

it was hard to think of a worse fate.

"So," Tristan said to Isaac, who'd sunken into silence. "You'll take me on as your sidekick?" He flashed a winsome smile.

"Don't go cozying up to me."

"Why? You didn't like? I'll do better next time."

"None of *that* either!" He raised his voice without meaning to, attracting looks from nearby tables. Isaac grabbed the check and got to his feet. "I'm done."

"Um, aren't we going dutch?"

"It's on me!" Isaac barked.

He paid and left the restaurant. Tristan chased after him. "Thanks," he said, looking up at the taller Isaac.

"I told you to keep your distance! I'm not interested in that kind of thing."

"Nothing wrong with going *that* far, is there? You got a girlfriend right now, Isaac?"

"I'm not looking for any sympathy from the likes of you!"

"There's no need to so hardheaded about it."

"Oh, shut up, you little perv."

"We just can't help it. One way or another, vampires are all a little crazy when it comes to sex."

Almost despite himself, Isaac cast a sideways glance at him. Tristan seemed strangely glum.

"It really pisses me off at times," he said under his breath. Isaac wondered if he'd misheard him. The look of a prowling cat rose to Tristan's face. "So, who are we hunting tonight?"

"We're not hunting anybody. I'm looking for crypts."

"If you're looking for a crypt, I know a new one that just opened up."

"Where?"

"Lucy's Wake. You know the place?"

"You mean, as in a funeral wake? Nope. But it is a popular name."

Tristan laughed. "And all the better because of it. Attracts the

idiot vampire freaks like bees to honey. A regular smorgasbord. The prey don't have a clue, even when they're pairing up with the real thing. And it's always too late when they do."

"There's a never-ending supply of idiots like that in this city."

"There will always be people willing to pay any price to seize immortality. Though most are simply used up and tossed out. So, shall we take a look?"

"It'd be worth checking out to see if there's anybody there on the black list."

"You have any weapons on you? It'd help."

"Just a crucifix and my ultraviolet flashlight."

"Here, take this." Tristan handed Isaac a small bottle filled with a translucent liquid.

"Holy water?"

"Rosewater. Holy water is only good on young vampires. Rosewater works on all of us. We're talking 100 percent natural. The concentration matters, too. This is top grade stuff."

Isaac popped the top and sniffed. The fragrant smell of roses wafted up.

"It's perfume?"

"Hey, I'm not trying to pull one over on you. Holy water doesn't do a thing to me. But this—"

Tristan was wearing the fingerless gloves. He pulled off the left and held out his hand. "One drop here."

Isaac shrugged and spilled a drop of the liquid onto his palm. With a small *pop* and the flicker of an orange flame, the flesh burst into flame.

Isaac grabbed his wrist and shook it dry. "Whoa, watch it!"

"I'm okay," Tristan said, pulling on the glove. "That much only scalds a bit."

Isaac took a longer look at the bottle. "This isn't fuming sulfuric acid, is it?"

"Try it on yourself."

He did, though far more carefully this time. Nothing happened. The sweet smell of roses and damp skin. That was all.

"If a vampire chick used this, she'd be toast. Literally."

"The smell gives it away. So they definitely wouldn't."

"Makes sense."

Isaac refastened the lid, and put it in his pocket. "Hey, you know, thanks."

Tristan looked genuinely surprised, and then smiled graciously.

"How's your hand?"

"It's okay. Let's go."

The curtains of the night descended over the street as the two set off for their destination.

Lucy's Wake was in a completely different part of town than Rosebud. Off the main avenue—lined with high-class retail establishments—down several narrow streets, in the basement of a small building that housed a coffee shop. It was flanked by an ethnic restaurant and a dress boutique.

Checking out the patrons before letting them in, the bouncer in the doorway was nattily dressed in a frock coat.

Isaac whispered to Tristan, "This place have a dress code?"

"Yeah. They're a bit stricter than Rosebud. But I think we're okay."

Neither was denied admittance. It was probably a good idea that Isaac was wearing his regular all-black work outfit—here it passed for a fashion statement.

At the end of the hallway, the main floor opened up, larger than Isaac expected. The interior space was a good two stories high. A spiral staircase wound down another level to the floor from the basement entranceway. A big casket was situated in the middle of the floor, surrounded by flowers.

Lucy's, perhaps. The casket was closed, so Isaac couldn't tell. But that a real vampire might be lying there, and that anybody could sneak up and take a peek, gave him the willies.

Isaac sidled up to the counter and looked down at the floor. It was pretty packed. The dais upon which the casket was placed was raised above the floor. Tables dotted the circumference of the dance floor, and all were filled. There were presently no dancers on the floor.

"Still a little early," Tristan said next to him. "The vampires usually won't show up until after midnight. But—let's see—that one there in the red jacket." He indicated a young man with a bald head and an aquiline nose. "Third generation. A so-called minion."

"The third bitee in a direct line from the biter. What does he do?"

"A small-time grifter. Goes fishing for his sire. Let the little fish swim away and he'll lead you up the food chain."

The most efficient way to deal with vampires was to go after the progenitors. When it came to third generation and below, their sires were only too happy to throw them to the wolves. A second generation in the hand, though, was worth dozens in the bush. All the more so with the elders. But getting a shot at them was no easy task.

Isaac followed Mr. Red Jacket with his eyes. He was chatting up a pair of young girls.

"Will any direct descendants show up?"

"Now and then. This place has a VIP lounge. I don't have to tell you that it's not easy getting in."

Isaac said sardonically, "You're VIP material, aren't you?"

That prompted a ready smile. "Outcast that I am, I don't get that kind of respect. In any case, the better approach would be to tail them when they leave."

"Either way, we've got to catch them red-handed," Isaac muttered. He was mulling over the options when somebody approached him from the side, and called out loudly.

"Long time no see, Isaac. Looking good."

Isaac glanced over his shoulder and furrowed his brows. Tristan slipped behind him like a shadow. Scowling at the familiar face, Isaac turned around.

Gildas had been with the Helsing Group only a month ago. Before that, he'd earned his keep as an unlicensed hunter. Once he'd gotten his official papers and met his qualifying quota, he'd gone back to freelancing.

"Do I look good to you? Thanks to a certain somebody not bothering to consider the consequences and quitting on me, I hardly have time to sleep these days."

"Oh, I considered the consequences," Gildas quipped. "On my wallet. And you should, too. Working your ass off for the Group when all it gets you is scale plus expenses. I'm telling you, find yourself a fat cat with a vampire on his tail, and the sky's the limit."

"Yeah, you with your get-rich-quick schemes when it's all coming out of the Group's pocket. You've got some nerve."

"Well, time is money, and so is information. You know what I'm talking about. Hang out your own shingle and start earning a decent wage. Whatever you're in hock to the Group for, you'll pay them off in no time—even a bunch of deadbeat shysters like them."

"Give it a fucking rest." Isaac didn't bother being nice about it.

Gildas shrugged. "Suit yourself. But I spotted this crypt first. I don't know who clued you in, but I got first dibs on any vamps in here. So stay out of my way."

"I don't much feel like following your orders right now."

"Just a heads up. Won't do much for the Group's reputation if all of their hunters are out of action."

Gildas smiled ferociously, baring his tobacco-stained teeth, and disappeared into the crowd.

"Didn't look like much to me," came a quiet voice from behind Isaac's back.

When Isaac turned around, Tristan was leaning against the

railing, looking down at the dance floor.

"You think? He gets results. I suppose because he lets the ends justify the means."

"But he didn't notice me."

"I didn't either, the other night. No harm, no foul."

"I don't agree. What he didn't notice was that you had company."

"Probably didn't think that I did."

Tristan bit his knuckles and stared down at the floor. "You can want something too much, and that's when bad things happen. Vampires are sheep in wolves' clothing. They'll always bring a gun to a knife fight. And by the time you figure out just how strong they are, it's too late."

"Yeah, tell him that. At any rate, I'll log this one in my report."

They stuck around until after midnight and identified a few more minions. Nothing like a second generation vampire showed up. Isaac yawned.

"I'm outta here. I've got morning classes tomorrow."

"I'll wait around a bit longer. Something's bound to happen around closing time."

"You think? Let me know if anything goes down, okay?" He raised his hand in a brief wave. "See you."

He turned to leave when Tristan caught hold of his sleeve.

"What?"

"Remuneration."

"Huh?"

Isaac raised his brows quizzically. Tristan grinned like a Cheshire cat. "For tonight's information."

"Fine. We'll have one on me."

"What are you looking away for?"

"Like you have to ask! Fool me once—" Isaac turned his face so their eyes wouldn't meet.

"Look at me, Isaac."



"Forget it."

"Idiot. I'm not going to try anything funny in a place like this. C'mon, look at me."

The scowling Isaac reluctantly turned around. Tristan gazed at him with intent but strangely innocent eyes. In the dim light, his eyes brimmed with a curious kind of calm. Between the beats of the undulating rhythm, his whispered words thrummed against Isaac's eardrums.

"Kiss me."

He stood on tiptoe and brought his mouth closer. Isaac hastily backpedaled. But Tristan caught him. His thin arms notwithstanding, he was quite strong.

"Here?"

"Nobody's going to care about a kiss."

"Well, *I* do. I don't want to be seen getting kissed by a guy."

"Nobody's looking. If you don't kiss me, I'll bite you."

"Listen—"

"What choice do you have? Pitch a fit and people *will* look."

Isaac's shoulders slumped. The kid threw him completely off his game. He couldn't put a finger on it, but his wiring was shorting out. For a vampire, Tristan seemed awfully open and unguarded and *human*.

What the hell is it with this kid? Isaac sighed.

"Okay. Fine."

He put his arms around Tristan, prepared to give him a fleeting, perfunctory kiss. Except that's not how it came off. Tristan wrapped his arms around Isaac's neck and drew closer and frenched him long and hard.

"H-hey—!" panted Isaac.

Tristan licked his lips and grinned. "Much appreciated."

Isaac spun around without answering and marched to the exit. A soft voice trailed after him.

"G'night, Isaac. See you tomorrow."

A final look back was met by Tristan's enchanting, luscious

smile. Isaac fought the impulse to retrace his steps and kiss him again. Angrily and forcefully controlling himself, he quickened his pace as he left the establishment.

Chapter Two

The Forsaken

A clearly exasperated Vivian said, "What are you doing here all by your lonesome? It's practically evening already."

Without lifting his head off the desk, Isaac raised his leaden eyes and looked up at her blearily. "Because it's practically evening already."

"What a waste."

Her bounteous curls of hair swayed as she leaned over and blew a ring of tobacco smoke at his face. Isaac waved it away and straightened in his chair, glowering at Vivian's elegant backside as she strode around the office.

Today she was sporting a black leather corset with purple lacing, along with a gold and pearl necklace that jangled against her breasts with each step. Tight vinyl trousers and stiletto boots.

Aside from the utilitarian headset, she looked like a model for a goth fashion magazine taking a smoking break during a photo shoot. The look suited her well.

"Isn't smoking prohibited in here?"

"Except for me."

Always an exception for the princess. Isaac drew in a deep breath and let it out. Vivian ground out her just-lit cigarette, sat down at her desk and crossed her long legs. Isaac glanced at the crumpled remains of the long, slender cigarette. A luxury brand compared to the coffin nails that Isaac smoked on occasion. His kvetching notwithstanding, it seemed a waste.

Ah, to live the life of the rich, Isaac groused to himself. Vivian ignored his private angst as she flipped through the pages on her clipboard with her equally elegant fingers.

"Put a smile on that face of yours already. You've been putting in good numbers recently. Productivity is up. You're digging up new crypts right and left." She glanced at Isaac—who was slumped lifelessly in his chair—and said, "You getting intel off that kid?"

"Huh?"

"The vampire who's got a thing for you. The kid with the silver hair. A direct descendant, right? You sure caught yourself a big one."

"Less the catcher than the catchee. He threatened to stalk me if I didn't let him tag along."

"As stalkers go, he's an awfully cute one."

"There's nothing cute about it. I like girls, you know? Having him hanging around all the time is no thrill for me. And he's a vampire. And on top of that—"

"On top of that?"

"—nothing."

Isaac looked away and sunk back into silence. Like he was going to tell her how the kid's nightly "remuneration" consisted of make-out sessions. His reputation as a hunter was on the line. But Vivian had a bloodhound's nose for potentially comic material, and in a flash she was out of her chair and circling his desk and peering at his face.

"Come to think about it, you haven't made any requests for petty cash. Exactly how are you rewarding him? And don't tell me he's volunteering his services."

"Because, uh, I was going to submit my receipts all at once."

"The rule is, informants are paid on a per diem basis. Money or goods. You're not taking advantage of the poor boy's good intentions, are you? That wouldn't be true to the principles of the Group."

"Yeah, and just who is taking advantage of who? He's being compensated."

"Compensated how? Can't be money, not from a starving student like you."

A vein throbbed in Isaac's forehead. "A bit of tact when stating the painfully obvious wouldn't hurt!"

"Then—no, you didn't—you're making private blood donations?"

Vivian grabbed Isaac's head and before he could object, checked the left and right sides of his neck. His vertebrae cracked loudly.

"Hey, watch it! I'll send you the bill from my chiropractor."

"You gave me a fright there. A hunter becoming a minion would be no laughing matter. Turnabout is definitely not fair play in this job."

"Enough with the third degree. I'm not laughing either."

"So what currency are you using?"

Isaac winced and didn't answer. Vivian focused her eagle-eyed gaze on him. And then... smiled and shrugged. "Well, I won't make you answer. Just don't get in over your head."

"Nobody's getting in over his head! I'll tell you, okay? The kid came onto me. I didn't have a choice."

Vivian said in a come-hither voice, swiveling her hips, "You mean, *make me your sidekick or I stalk you crazy?* That sort of thing?"

"Give me a break."

"Naw. This is way too delectable of a conversation."

"To you, maybe. Not to me."

"You'd better treat him right. A cooperative vampire without ulterior motives is as rare as hen's teeth."

"He's got ulterior motives all over the place."

Even if bloodsucking wasn't the goal, the fact was that the kid came on like gangbusters. More recently he was grinding his hips into his and feeling him up top to bottom. Worse, Isaac felt himself getting caught up in the moment when they kissed. Even thinking about it now, the blood rushed to his head and he felt a little dizzy.

"Arrgh! Vampires are the enemy of all mankind!"

"What's this all of a sudden?" said the surprised Vivian,

jumping away from him.

"They're the natural foes of my family."

"Oh, please." Vivian whacked Isaac on the back of his skull, bobbing his head forward.

"I hate vampires," he growled.

Vivian sighed deeply. "Yeah, I know. But don't forget that second generation and below are themselves no better than cannon fodder. The generals directing the battle—the elder sires—are the cause. Our ultimate mission is to root out the virus's original vector and eradicate it. The Group believes in granting vampires who share our goal the respect due them. As a Group hunter, you need to remember that. We're different from the freelancers, who only think in terms of money."

"Yeah, I know." Isaac took a tired breath, let it out, and got to his feet. "I guess I'll be going, then."

"Oh, wait a sec." Vivian picked up a different file. "This is the data on recent infections. There's something here that concerns us."

"What's that?"

"The nature of the virus involved. Each of the seven elders is different in his own way. But historically, the distribution of their minions and slaves has remained fairly consistent. This time, though, one pedigree in particular stands out."

"In other words, the descendants of one elder sire are multiplying faster."

"That's what it looks like. Run it past your sidekick—if there's something new going on in the vampire community."

Isaac shrugged. "I'll ask. But he doesn't hang out with other vampires."

"Not surprising for a vampire that hangs out with hunters. A real heretic. They pop up now and then—a strong bloodline and yet a revulsion toward vampires and a willingness to stand alone. Can't expect them to have a direct line to the inner circles, but it won't hurt to ask."

Isaac nodded. "Will do."

Outside, like a nocturnal beast stirring from sleep, the night was blinking its eyes and coming back to life.

Tristan's warm tongue swirled around his mouth. Isaac drew his brows together and half opened his eyes. Tristan's white cheeks were tinged with red, and his closed eyelashes trembled slightly.

The intoxicating aroma enveloped Isaac. He roughly pushed Tristan away. "That's enough," he spat out.

Tristan stared back at him with a surprised expression on his face. His swimming eyes brimmed with tears, threatening to spill out at any moment. Any onlooker would have sworn Isaac was the instigator and the one at fault.

He blinked slowly. His parted lips looked like half-open flower buds in a light rain, and just as arresting a sight. Then Tristan narrowed his eyes. A languid smile rose to those lips. Like a cat, he slipped back into Isaac's arms.

He wrapped his arms around his neck and whispered, "Seeing as tonight's hunt was over and above the call of duty, don't you think it calls for a little more generosity?"

"Now's not the time to go upping the ante," said the cheerless Isaac.

Tristan grasped Isaac's chin and gazed at him. His black eyes reflected the light from the streetlights, making them sparkle like a band of stars in the Milky Way. Isaac felt his magnetic appeal and tried to look away.

"I wanted to ask you something."

"What? If I answer, can I kiss you again?" Tristan perched on his toes and teasingly closed his lips around Isaac's earlobe.

Isaac roughly pushed him away.

"Can't you focus your attention on anything else for two seconds? Are all vampires a bunch of nymphos like you?"

"When your stomach is empty, can you think of anything else but food?"

"You want to eat me?"

"That's one way of putting it." He licked his lips. "Another way is, it's the ultimate meal."

"My blood type is AB, Rh-positive. Nothing unusual about it in the slightest."

"What a nice surprise. Me too."

"If you're that hungry, I'll buy you some. Not a problem for somebody with a hunter license. There's a blood bank not far from here—"

"No need." Tristan cuddled closer. "A fresh kiss is so much better."

"Fresh? Look—"

"Don't you know? It isn't blood itself that vampires consume. But the metaphysical essence contained within the bodily fluids of living things—call it the human *ode*. Blood has the highest concentrations, and some vampires do develop a particular fondness for the taste."

"If you know where to look, these days you can buy blood group-specific dehydrated plasma capsules."

"When it comes to *ode*, freshness is life. What you're talking about is the same as nicotine gum is to a smoker."

"Second-grade, underground goods maybe. I can get you medical-grade."

"I can get it myself. A kiss is better. I'd really prefer doing *that*. But I guess you don't."

"I told you, never again."

"Never say never. Once more, just to see for sure? I'll pull out all the stops this time."

"And I say, no way! Quit touching me."

Tristan pursed his lips and pouted. "Saliva doesn't have a lot of *ode* in it. Blood has the most. After that, semen—"

"No!"

"And so I soldier through on saliva alone. Man, what a miser you are."

"Miser? *I'm* the one making out with you every night until my mouth hurts." Isaac thrust him away and turned on his heel, fuming.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm going home."

"You said there was something you wanted to ask me."

Isaac stopped and turned around. Tristan was leaning against the wall, smiling at him with that laidback manner that just pissed him off. Grinding his teeth, Isaac hesitated, and then retraced his steps.

"Recently, there's been an outbreak of a particular strain of virus. Vivian wanted me to sound you out for possible theories."

Tristan mused for a moment, stroking his shapely chin. "The first theory I can think of is that a particular sire is multiplying his number of minions with a specific goal in mind. I'm sure you know this, but getting repeatedly bit by vampires in the same lineage accelerates an outbreak."

"And then getting bitten by a vampire from a different line causes a mutation, resulting in a werewolf or ghoul."

"Yes. That's why a vampire usually won't touch a victim who's already been bitten. The wound becomes a stigma."

"The wound disappears pretty quickly, doesn't it?"

"Not to our eyes. So vampires check for the stigma first, before taking blood. The intelligence of werewolves and ghouls often degrades and they become difficult to handle. Vampires don't want to see their numbers increasing either."

Isaac sniffed. "No need for anything but obedient minions, eh? But what do you do when the scales suddenly tip in one direction? Clan warfare?"

"The wounds on those infected persons?"

"For the most part, no trace of them. Like they were infected a while ago, but suddenly started presenting with symptoms now."

Even when symptoms don't show up, they're recorded as carriers and are placed in the care of the public health bureau. Though that responsibility is currently being subcontracted to the Group."

"In that case, there must be a different cause. As far as I know, none of the broods is trying to increase their number of minions. Winning humans over and pulling the strings from the shadows is safer and more effective. I don't anticipate vampires becoming the majority."

"Then what? Pure coincidence?"

"There is another possibility."

"Such as?"

"What strain of virus is this?"

"That, I don't know."

"Let's find out," Tristan said in an unexpectedly serious tone of voice.

Isaac got out his cell phone. "Vivian? Sorry about the hour, but there's something I needed to ask you about this recent outbreak. Do you know what strain of the virus it is?"

"That I do," Vivian answered briskly. "Type J. If anything, it was on the decline recently."

Isaac covered the phone mic and relayed the information to Tristan. It didn't seem possible, but he paled a bit.

"Anything else you wanted to ask?"

Tristan shook his head. Isaac said goodbye to Vivian and put his phone away. "Somebody you know?"

"Jado," Tristan said under his breath.

"Jado?"

"One of the vampire elders. And my sire."

Isaac stared dumbly back at him. "The guy who made you a vampire?"

"Yes. Jado has been asleep for years. The elders periodically sleep for decades at a time. Under normal circumstances, he would currently be active. But several years ago, after suffering a serious injury, he went into hibernation ahead of schedule. He won't wake

up until after regenerating."

"And the result is that the virus is active and on the loose?"

"Probably. That being the case, the spike in Jado's descendants would be a temporary phenomenon. It would return to normal after a predictable period of time. It serves as a harbinger of an elder's awakening."

"Meaning that, for the time being, all the elders are in hibernation? Shit. That would really put a dent in their influence. An ideal opportunity to fight back."

"There's still time left on that clock," Tristan muttered, biting his knuckle. "Jado won't be at full fighting strength. The two of us might even be able to take him out."

"The two of us?"

"I'll help. Stands to reason, doesn't it? No matter how bedridden he might be, you're no match for an elder by yourself. But with a direct descendant by your side, it comes down to formulating the right strategy and tactics."

Isaac objected at once. "Just a sec. Jado is your sire? That means if Jado dies, then you—"

"Then I die. At last."

Isaac couldn't help staring at Tristan. Tristan smiled serenely. A relieved expression, not fearful at all. In sharp contrast, the flustered Isaac said forcefully, "Don't be an idiot! You'll *die*. Don't you get that?"

"Of course I do. It's all I've wanted all along. Death is better than living forever sucking human blood."

He spoke so plainly—without a sign of doubt in his eyes—that Isaac had nothing to say in reply.

Tristan's features relaxed a bit. "But I do not want to die alone. If I die and Jado lives, there will only be more victims. That is not an outcome I can tolerate." However controlled his emotions, a severe tone crept into his voice. "I can't tell you how many times I have plotted his death. I hate to say it, but it's not something I can do alone. He can kill me any time he wants. I can't kill him. Rebelling

against one's superiors is taboo. All my good intentions count for nothing."

Isaac stood there, at a total loss for words. Tristan slowly walked up to him. "I've been looking for someone who could kill him. Somebody who would destroy him and end me. Somebody who fit the job like a glove. Like you."

"Me?"

"You. You can do it."

"Don't spout nonsense. The guy's a fucking *elder*. I hate to say it, but I've only been a hunter for a year. I'm good for taking out minions and assorted riff-raff. That's about it."

"I'll help. Together, the two of us can make it happen."

"You make it sound like a pop song."

Tristan rejoined, "I'm pretty strong, if I say so myself. My looks can be deceiving."

When it came to vampires, looks were highly deceiving. A schoolgirl vampire had once been seen knocking a heavyweight wrestler out of the ring with barely a flick of her dainty wrist. She looked like a delicate piece of fine china when she was, in fact, a direct descendant.

Who was he to say that Tristan—with a similar bloodline—wasn't capable of the same?

He'd gathered as much, having reluctantly accepted Tristan's assistance these past two weeks. But accompanying a supernatural strength that belied his willowy frame was a keen intelligence well beyond his apparent years. And yet Isaac suspected he hadn't seen even a tenth of his true abilities.

To get up close and personal with a direct descendant was to step into an unimaginable world removed from the "reality" of common sense. And all the more so when contemplating the challenges presented by an actual elder.

"You can do it, Isaac."

Isaac winced a bit under Tristan's gaze. "I appreciate that, but—"

"Why the second guessing? Eliminate Jado and we will save countless lives. It'll wipe out his whole family line, including the minions and direct descendants. But all those with dormant infections will be released from their dreadful fate."

"I'm not arguing with that. But you'll die too!"

"Like I said, I'm down with that. After all, what do you care about a vampire's death? Better off dead, wouldn't you say?"

Isaac waved his hand back and forth, as if to defend himself from the cutting edge in that remark. "Yeah, I hate vampires. Just because they're victims of the virus too gives me no reason to sympathize. The principles of the Group aside, vampires are enemies of me and mine. They're responsible for the death of my parents and sister!"

"And that's why I picked you. I knew that Jado would awaken soon. I didn't expect it this quickly, though."

This matter-of-fact reply left Isaac a bit flustered. "Hunters who became hunters to avenge the death of their family are hardly rare."

"That is true too." Tristan glanced up at Isaac from beneath his brows. A teasing smile rose to his lips. "Honestly speaking, you just happen to be my type. I was hoping for one last rapturous fling before I died."

"What the hell!" Isaac fumed.

Tristan practically glided up beside him, so close as to feel his breath. "In other words, when I die, there'll be no more of this—"

Not giving him time to react, Tristan pressed his lips tightly against Isaac's. He tried to jump backwards, but Tristan's arms around his back and neck were unrelenting.

After much struggling, Isaac tore himself free. Following a brief pause to catch his breath, he yelled, "I told you to knock it the hell off!"

"I won't," Tristan stubbornly insisted. "If you don't promise to help me destroy Jado, I'll stick myself to you like glue. I'll follow you to college. Kiss you in front of the girls."

"Son of a bitch!" Before he knew what he was doing, Isaac made a fist and was cocking back his arm to take a swing at him.

A voice barked behind him, "Hey, what's going on here?"

He turned around. A uniformed cop shone a flashlight in his eyes. The stinging bright "natural light" flashlight made Isaac reflexively raise his hand to shield his eyes.

"Whoa! You a vampire?" the cop shouted, with a mixture of fear and bravado.

That riled up Isaac all the more. "I'm a hunter!" he shot back.

"Let's see your ID."

Isaac took out his ID and tossed it in the direction of the flashlight. The cop's partner caught it.

"Hey, get that thing out of my eyes."

But the light didn't budge. A small, cylindrical object landed at his feet. "Right eye," he was ordered.

A cell phone-sized retina scanner. Isaac placed it over his right eye. A minute later, the cop heaved a sigh of relief. "Confirmed."

The flashing dipped away from his face. Isaac blinked and tossed the scanner back to the cop.

"Where's that guy you were with?"

Isaac glanced over his shoulder. At some point, Tristan had disappeared. Isaac grabbed the cop's collar "Shit! You let him get away?"

"What—he a vampire?"

"Naw. Snitch. Slippery little squirt at that." Isaac grumbled to himself and let go of the cop.

"I see. Sorry for interrupting. A lot of *commerce* has been going on in these parts, if you know what I mean. The neighborhood watch has been complaining about public morals and whatnot."

"Yeah, pain in the ass, all right." Isaac nodded in sympathy and took off. He'd resolved to keep on going, but upon reaching the main thoroughfare he still hadn't shaken the feeling. He shook his head and turned around.

It was the end of the week. The street was thronged with people. Long lines snaked out in front of the popular clubs. He scanned the crowds, but didn't see Tristan anywhere. He looked down alleyways and ducked into shops, but came up empty handed.

Running around like this only pissed him off. He supposed he should be relieved. It was more convenient this way, but he hated leaving things up in the air. So much so that at this point, it'd be fine with him if he never came back.

And yet—he felt like he was wearing a pair of concrete galoshes. He stopped and scratched his head in annoyance.

"Shit!"

Just dump him, said the devil on one shoulder. *Just take one more look around*, argued the angel on his other. Isaac started walking. All at once, the image of a particular establishment popped into his head.

Rosebud.

The nightclub where he'd first met Tristan. He was probably a regular there. It'd be a good place to check. But he'd really have to steel his nerves to walk back into *that* gay watering spot.

When he got to Rosebud, he told himself that this was all part of the job description, and went in.

Thanks to the weekend business, the place was even more packed than the last time. The surging crowds swayed and throbbed to the pounding music. Judging by the black leather and chains, bondage seemed to be the theme this night.

Grinding his hips, a drag queen batted his long lashes at Isaac. Anywhere else, he would have easily been mistaken for the opposite sex—and a pretty hot number at that. Isaac gritted his teeth and pushed through the sea of humanity.

His eyes were drawn to a familiar sight at the bar. He had no trouble distinguishing the straight line of Tristan's back from that of

any other similarly attractive young man. Isaac didn't find anything especially attractive about vampires. But there was a particular sort of grace in Tristan's posture, standing or sitting.

Seeing the dejected look on his face, Isaac could almost believe that Tristan's bawdy behavior was all an act.

And then he noticed that Tristan wasn't alone and stopped again. A big guy was chatting him up. The guy's light blond hair was gelled straight up. He was wearing large ear cuffs. Isaac hadn't seen him the last time here.

Muscular shoulders poked out from his frayed and sleeveless denim jacket. His forearms were those of an athlete. He smiled, baring yellow canines that extended all the way down to his bottom gums.

He wasn't a vampire. He was an ordinary human being. And in Isaac's estimation, one of the idiots. A real vampire never showed his fangs until he was settling down to eat. There seemed no end to the peacocking pretenders showing off their big, sharp, prosthetic fangs.

A fashion statement in the underground culture, just like tattoos and body piercings. To one particular segment of the teen rebel population, vampires had become the equivalent of pop idols. Except that in the space between the image and the reality, anything could happen, and most of it bad.

At first, Tristan seemed to be indifferent toward him. But then his mood changed. He turned his face to the man leaning over him and gave him a long look, as if appraising his worth. And flashed a teasing smile. The man grinned and slipped his arm around the slender Tristan's waist and began to whisper in his ear.

Isaac didn't know why, but he was getting ticked. He was about to barge in when somebody clapped him on the shoulder. A tall, thin and bald kid was standing there in a leather corset. "Hey, want to dance?"

"Bugger off!" Isaac hissed. He walked up to Tristan and the other man and said in a low voice, "Get lost."

The man took a forceful breath and said with a backwards glance, "I was here first, dude."

But then he felt the hard, cold steel pressed against his side and gulped less heroically. Isaac gave him another nudge with the barrel of the gun, while glaring at Tristan, who was studiously looking the other way.

"I said, get going."

"J-Jesus, dude. Don't get your panties all in a bunch."

He retreated with all due speed. Isaac didn't spare him another look as he tucked the gun back into its holster. He grabbed the sulking Tristan by the arm and yanked him to his feet.

"C'mon."

"Wait a minute—!" Tristan protested, stumbling to catch his balance.

Isaac didn't reply, but plunged through the crowds, dragging Tristan behind him. When they got outside the nightclub, Tristan shook his hand free.

"Leave me alone!"

"You plan on making that guy your new fuck buddy?"

"And if I was? What the hell do you care?" The normally taciturn Tristan snapped at him with a barbed tongue.

"You just dump me like that and go off with a freak like him?"

"Eh?" Tristan made a show of cupping his hand to his ear. "I can't hear you!" His superhuman sensory abilities notwithstanding, he feigned ignorance well.

"So you make out with me and then turn around and sleep with that Neanderthal? That's what I'm asking."

"Hoh. Jealous, are we?"

"I'm just telling you, it fucking creeps me out! That's all!"

"What, like it makes you want to wash your mouth out?"

Isaac clenched his trembling fists. Little smartass. Now he was itching to tear him a new one. Clobber the little squirt into next week. But the street wasn't empty. If the news got out, get stopped

for a mere traffic ticket and he'd be screwed. And when word got back to the Group, Vivian would run him through the wringer.

"Not here," he said.

"What?"

"People are going to think we're having some gay lovers' spat."

"Isn't that what this is?"

"Shut up! C'mon, let's go."

Isaac set off with long strides. Tristan followed behind, grumbling under his breath. Isaac didn't look behind him to see if he was there as he walked towards the busy intersection.

Chapter Three

Innocent Blood

Tristan stood in the doorway.

Isaac said in a peeved tone of voice, "What are you waiting for? Get your ass in here."

He'd quelled most of his anger on the taxi ride over. But the sense of annoyance lingered.

Tristan said with an equally exasperated shrug, "A bit careless for a hunter, isn't it? Inviting in a vampire?"

"Dammit, are you coming in or not?"

"Temper, temper. You're going to give yourself a stroke."

"Oh, be quiet. And lock the door."

Tristan stepped into the flat and locked the door behind him. The narrow hallway had a door on either side. At the end of the hallway was a living room. To the right was a small kitchen. To the left was the door leading back the other way to the bedroom.

Tristan stood at the entrance to the living room and examined the interior. An old leather sofa, table, floor lamp, squat bookcase, and small flat screen television. That was about as far as the interior decor went.

"Hmm. A lot tidier than I expected."

"Than you expected? I prefer things tidy."

"Like I said, unexpected."

"Damn, you can be annoying. Don't much feel like offering you anything now."

"Oh, tea would be nice. With milk."

Too fed up to argue, Isaac sighed and went to the kitchen. "What the hell was I thinking, bringing him back here?" he grumbled to himself, as he turned on the burner. He ransacked the cupboard

and found a cardboard box that smelled like tea in the back corner.

He tossed the teabag into a mug and poured in steaming water. Added milk (almost at its expiration date). When he returned to the living room, Tristan had picked up the framed photograph on the bookshelf and was examining it. Isaac grabbed the frame from him and shoved the mug into his hand.

"Have some respect for other people's property."

"Sorry. That your family?"

Isaac straightened the frame on the bookcase. Then grabbed his own mug and sat down heavily on the sofa. He took a sip of tea. "Yeah. They got killed by vampires."

Tristan fell silent. The photograph was of a birthday party, eight years ago. The twelve-year-old Isaac and his twin sister Isabel. Their parents. Isaac was the only survivor. The tragedy struck less than a month after the photograph was taken.

Isaac had hated vampires ever since. For stealing his family from him and leaving him alone in the world, he swore vengeance upon these monsters and became a hunter to extract his vengeance upon them.

To this day, he didn't know who had destroyed his family. And so all vampires became the target of his loathing. Including the one standing here in his living room.

Isaac raised his gaze and looked at Tristan. He was holding the mug in both hands and staring intently at the photograph. A look of pain—as if bearing up under a great sadness—flickered across his face.

Isaac averted his eyes and said roughly, "If you know something about the perps, then tell me."

"If I do, will you listen to my request?"

The unexpected rejoinder brought Isaac to his feet in a bound. "You know?"

He shook Tristan by the shoulders. Tristan didn't answer, only stared back at him, a shadowy smile rising to his lips. Isaac ground his teeth and seized him by the collar instead.

"What do you know? Tell me!"

"And will you kill Jado?" His eyes shone with an inner glow. Isaac felt a moment of fear. Tristan reached up and touched Isaac's cheek. "I'll tell you when we kill Jado."

"When Jado dies, so do you."

"There will be time enough to say his name. Promise me, Isaac. Promise me you'll kill Jado."

Was it really so simple a matter as saying, *I promise*? The logical part of Isaac's brain whispered to him—*life is never this simple*. He should take advantage of this vampire with a death wish while he could.

All vampires were better off dead. This one was volunteering. Isaac should oblige him. Why hesitate?

"Even though you'll die too—?" *What are you saying?* What did he care whether a vampire lived or died?

Tristan smiled an understanding smile. Like a parent addressing a thickheaded child he said, "No different than exterminating the rats carrying the plague."

Isaac rejoined angrily, "Don't say shit like that. You're not a rat or a mosquito or a flea!"

"Neither am I human, Isaac," Tristan said patiently. "I am a vampire."

"No need to tell me!" Isaac shouted and whirled around.

Tristan wrapped his arms around him and pressed his cheek against his back and whispered, "But I think you tend to forget—"

Isaac felt his heart racing. *Damn*, he thought to himself. *Why am I getting all hot and bothered?*

"—when I'm not here to remind you."

The curious change in his voice switched on a warning signal in Isaac's brain. He'd hardly turned around when an unexpected blow sent him flying backwards. His head hit the arm of the sofa. It was padded, but it was as good as being hit with a roundhouse punch by the glove of a heavyweight boxer.

He groaned. A pair of hands slammed against his shoulders

pinning him against the cushions. Tristan straddled his chest. He peered down at him. "Like I said, careless. Inviting in a vampire is as good as slitting your own throat. A disgrace to hunters everywhere."

"You're the one with the death wish! A vampire recruiting volunteers to bump off a vampire godfather—*that's* gotta be a disgrace to vampires everywhere."

Tristan blinked in surprise. The force of his hold slackened slightly. Enough for Isaac to take advantage of the situation and reverse the hold and pin him instead.

"I got no interest in going on a suicide-by-vampire mission."

Tristan gazed up at Isaac, a wistful look in his eyes. His lips trembled. His pupils were like deep wells, filled with sorrow. Seeing those eyes, Isaac suddenly understood why he kept avoiding such an opportune offer. The reason was plain and simple.

He didn't want the kid to die.

He'd refused to admit it. He couldn't even allow himself to think it.

Over the last two weeks since their first disgraceful meeting, far from being the onerous burden that he anticipated, at some point he'd become accustomed to his face. And the kid now occupied some hitherto unknown part of his soul.

If they got together almost every night, at the very least they could talk. Though Tristan had a strange personality for a vampire, at least hanging out with him wasn't a huge time sink. And not once had Isaac witnessed the kind of condescending arrogance toward humans that vampires were wont to display.

Far from it, he could BS about anything and laugh along with him like any normal human being. Walking together along a street at night, the strangeness of the situation had struck him more than once.

Why was he a vampire? What made a vampire a vampire?

Tristan definitely had supernatural abilities that placed him apart from *homo sapiens*. The glimpse Isaac occasionally caught of

his sharp fangs certainly wasn't normal. But even if he grasped this with his head, he couldn't grasp the differences between them with his gut.

Or put simply, Isaac had gotten used to him. While exchanging intimate caresses like lovers—albeit reluctantly—had he ended up wrapped around his little finger?

Isaac traced the outlines of those soft, breathing lips with the tip of his finger. Tristan knit his brows in confusion. Isaac caught a peek of his tongue in his half-open mouth—inviting like ripe fruit—recalling the numerous times he had tasted the sweet honey of his saliva on his tongue.

How strange, Isaac thought to himself. Vampire saliva was said to resemble opium, and yet was supposedly not addictive—

Isaac drew Tristan closer. Any other time, Tristan would have eagerly complied. But this time he hastily pushed Isaac away.

"Stop it, Isaac—"

Isaac hushed the protesting mouth with his own. For the first time, his tongue led the assault. Tristan's eyes opened wide. At first bewildered, he tried to pull himself free. But the energy drained from his arms. He opened his mouth wider and took him in deeper, enthusiastically entwining Isaac's tongue with his own.

Their breaths grew ragged. Their mouths parted. Tristan whimpered, wanting more. The lascivious glow of his ruddy tongue and glistening lips made Isaac gasp for air before ferociously kissing him again.

Desire outstripped feeling and emotion. The consequences be damned. Only the frenzy of the *now* mattered. There would be time for regrets later—no, he could never regret *this*, so no other thoughts mattered.

One deep, immersing kiss followed the next. Isaac undid Tristan's shirt and let his hands roam. His slender flat chest didn't kill the mood. He kneaded his nipples and they rose to peaks. Between kisses, Tristan moaned.

Baring his shoulders, Isaac closed his mouth around the pliant

flesh of his other nipple. Tristan hugged his arms around Isaac's head and panted. Isaac took his hand off Tristan's chest and slipped it down his body and pressed his palm against his hard cock.

The first time he'd touched anyone's but his own. And was equally surprised that he felt no sense of revulsion. He kissed Tristan's damp forehead and slowly began to stroke him. Tristan drew in his body as if to curl about him and snuggled his cheek against Isaac's chin.

Feeling a warm wetness on his fingertips, Isaac reflexively asked, "Feel good?"

Tristan didn't answer. A small nod sufficed. Hot breath coursed out of his lungs. Isaac seized his chin and raised his face so he could kiss him. In the dizzy rush, Tristan's moist eyes flared with erotic passion. He bared his throat and thrust his hips forward. Isaac intensified his strokes.

Together with the staccato beat of his pulse, he felt the warm wetness seeping between his fingers.

As Tristan tried to turn his flushed face away, Isaac stripped the rest of the clothes from his lower extremities and tossed them on the floor. He raised Tristan's enervated legs and probed deeper with his damp fingers.

Tristan's shoulders shook with surprise. The tender flesh yielded to his slick fingertips, closing around them. His body stirred as if of its own accord.

"N-no—"

Isaac was flustered by the unexpected resistance. Tristan tried to close his thighs. Isaac wedged himself between them, seized his knees and opened him wider.

"After fanning the flames that hard, you gotta let 'em burn."

"This—is—different—"

"What's different about this? I can tell you like it like this."

Tristan's cheeks blazed red with a fury of emotion. This reaction was the marked opposite of the sexually sophisticated Tristan who'd gone down on him the first time they met. And it

kindled in Isaac an even greater arousal. He twisted his slippery fingers, wrenching open the folded flesh. Tristan tightly closed his eyes and arched his back.

Trailing his lips along the raised collarbone, Isaac whispered, "This is a first for me. If it hurts, just shake your head."

Tristan half-opened his eyes and smiled. Breathing heavily, he nodded. Slowly he relaxed, and surrendered himself to Isaac's clumsily questing fingers. He bided his time, waiting for the right moment. Then pushed in the tip of his hard shaft into him. He was tighter than any woman. It would be easy to damage something.

"It doesn't—?"

Tristan shook his head and reached out and hugged him tighter. "Like that, deeper—"

The wispy, vanishing whisper made the small hairs prick up on the back of his neck. He drove his hips forward. Tristan unleashed a rapturous cry mingled with a small scream. As tight as he was, he was surprisingly supple inside. Each repeated thrust was met by a quivering sensation in the hot pleats of the flesh enveloping him.

God Almighty, thought Isaac, his brain already muddled with pleasure. Sweat poured from his brow. The feelings were so overpowering he couldn't stop himself.

"Ahhh—" Tristan gasped and moaned, his hands sliding along Isaac's arms. His bliss-intoxicated eyes looked up into his, and all reason stood on the verge of evaporating away—if any remained in the first place.

The tips of Tristan's fangs jutted out from between his wet and flaming lips. Having penetrated him and set his hips into motion, now Tristan instead pushed Isaac's hips and shoulders away from him.

Isaac had heard that at the heights of sexual ecstasy, vampires were driven to drink the blood of their partners. It was an almost uncontrollable, instinctual reaction. The greater the pleasure, the deeper the thirst.

Word on the street was that vampire sex was good enough to

die for. And for the unlucky ones, a real death was their reward. It wasn't unusual these days for a naked body to turn up in a dive or bordello—drained of every last drop of blood.

Yet there was no lack of erotic daredevils wanting to give it a try. Death and pleasure were two sides of the same coin. And vampires had become the coin of that realm.

Maybe I'll end up the same way.

It'd be a shameful epitaph for a hunter. At the same time, a different part of his being whispered that he didn't give a flying fuck either way. Isaac bent over and tried to kiss him. But Tristan turned his face away and pushed back against his chest.

"No—Isaac. Please—"

"Don't you want it—?"

What he didn't ask. Tristan shut his eyes tightly. A tear squeezed out of the corner of his eye. Isaac lifted it up on the tip of his finger and touched it to his tongue. Catching his breath, Tristan watched him through eyes contorted with desperate longing.

"It's okay. We've already kissed ourselves silly."

"No—later—do it later—" Tristan pleaded between ragged pants.

For an answer, Isaac grasped his outstretched arms and nipped at the base of his thumb. Tristan loosed a pitched cry and arched his back.

Grappling together on the narrow sofa, Tristan's head slipped off the edge of the cushions. Isaac wanted to kiss that exposed white throat hard enough to leave a mark. But somehow managed to resist.

Isaac hauled him back onto the cushions. Grabbing hold of his smooth thighs and lifting them up, he repeatedly thrust into Tristan deeper and deeper. The boundaries between them disappeared as he was gripped by a singular feeling of indivisible union.

The sweat streaming from his forehead dripped off the tip of his chin and fell onto Tristan's pale stomach. Isaac groaned uncontrollably. Waves of electric pleasure shot through him,



delivering pulsing, arousing shocks as he ejaculated again and again.

"Ahhh—" Raising a thin, keening cry, Tristan again drenched his lower abdomen.

Isaac gently withdrew from him. Tristan's body again trembled. His damp stomach undulated. Fierce breaths escaped his mouth as Isaac turned his face to him and whispered, "Can I kiss you now?"

A languid smile rose to Tristan's mouth. He pulled Isaac to him and kissed him warmly again and again. Lying together naked on the small sofa, they embraced each other for a long time.

On previous occasions when he'd reached such heights of passion, his impulse afterwards was to sleep. But right now he wanted to lie here forever with Tristan in his arms.

At some point, though, he fell into a light sleep. He was awakened by the movement of Tristan's body. Tristan sat up and looked out the window. A sliver of black was visible through the curtains. This was the deepest, darkest time of night.

"You leaving?" Isaac asked, lying back on the sofa.

Tristan glanced over his shoulder at him, then leaned over and kissed him. He didn't answer, but reached for his clothing scattered on the floor and began to dress.

Isaac pulled on his trousers and drained the mug on the table. The cold milk tea wetted his parched throat. Tristan stood at the window. He parted the curtains and stared out at the sleeping city. Isaac wrapped his arms around him and kissed the nape of his neck. Tristan reached up and fondled Isaac's hair, arching his neck backwards.

"Isaac, will you promise?"

"Promise what?"

"To help me kill Jado. Will you do it?"

"What are you talking about?" Isaac started and grabbed Tristan by the arm. "I can't do something like that knowing you'll die!"

"Isaac—" Tristan said, staring back at him.

Isaac hugged him tightly. "I know. But we'll capture him alive. He'd be a lot more useful to the Group alive than dead, anyway."

"No, you've got to kill him. Capture an elder vampire alive and the rest will awaken and join forces to get him back. That's how tuned into each other they are. They would kill everybody in the Helsing Group. Researchers and hunters alike, you'd all end up dead."

"I'm not going to let you die!"

"Don't you want to know who was responsible for the destruction of your family?"

"I'll find out by myself. Even if it takes a lifetime."

"There's no need to spend a lifetime," Tristan said with a strange and quiet solemnity.

When Isaac glanced down at him, Tristan quietly freed himself from his arms and retreated from the window. An unfamiliar expression crossed his pale face. Perhaps it was a complete lack of expression. A lifeless death mask.

"It's your job to ferret out the criminal element. But you've missed one."

"What are you saying?"

An icy smile creased Tristan's lips. "Me. I did it."

Isaac's thoughts went blank. He didn't grasp what Tristan was saying. The words simply bounced around his empty skull.

I did it. I. Did. It.

"I'm the one, Isaac." Tristan again flashed that shrewd, reptilian grin. "I killed your family."

Isaac shook his head over and over. "You're lying."

Tristan's cold eyes looked back at him.

"You're lying!" Isaac shouted. "Quit screwing around!"

Tristan suddenly thrust out his hand. In the palm was a chain. An oval pendant dangled from the end. "You remember this?"

Isaac stared wordlessly at the pendant. A cross was etched into the convex surface of the silver locket.

"It contained incense for warding off evil. A charm from long,

long ago that protects the wearer from vampires. Its only value these days is as an antique, a piece of woman's jewelry. Do you know whose, Isaac?"

"It belonged to Isabel. Our mother gave it to her on her twelfth birthday."

"And it subsequently disappeared from her corpse," Tristan added with a cruel smile.

"How did you get hold of it?"

"I took it as a keepsake."

"What are you saying?"

"A souvenir from a little killing game. Haven't you heard? Played by bored vampires looking for a little fun. Too bad you weren't home at the time. Off on some school camping trip, weren't you? As a result, we couldn't call it a clean sweep. Isabel had a fever and couldn't go. Poor Isabel. She so wanted to go with you."

The simmering emotions inside his head were coming to a boil. Isaac clenched his fists so hard the nails dug into his palm. "So you did it?"

"You're finally willing to admit it? Well, why don't you take a gander at this?"

Tristan took a small folded square from inside the locket. It was a family photo. The same as the framed photograph on Isaac's bookcase. However, this photo was stained a tea-brown color. The smell of blood created an all-too-real image that assaulted the nostrils.

Isaac felt a blood-red mist clouding his mind. His body moved before he could think clearly. He swung with all his might. Tristan easily raised his arm and blocked it with a casual smirk. The next instant, the world went topsy-turvy. Before Isaac could figure out what had happened, he had slammed hard onto the floor.

Standing above him, Tristan coolly tucked the photograph back into the locket. "If you want this back, then do as you're told and kill Jado. Do that and I'll give this to you, plus give you a fair shot at me. Deal?"

"Goddammit, Tristan—!"

Isaac bounded to his feet. Tristan cast him a contemptuous glance and opened the window wide. "You need to cool down. But don't worry. We shall soon meet again. Like it or not, you will definitely need my help to dispatch Jado. You should understand that better now."

"Wait!"

Tristan leapt nimbly from the window, turned in midair and flashed a smile back at him. His sharp fangs stood out against his red lips. "See you around, Isaac. I had a lot of fun tonight."

"Wait a damned minute!"

But his grasping hand closed on empty air. Tristan disappeared into the darkness, leaving behind only his laughter echoing through the night.

"Shit!"

Isaac slammed his fist against the windowsill and slumped to the floor.

Make no mistake. The kid was going to regret it.

Chapter Four

To Die For

Isaac's brain wasn't processing. He sat in a corner of the classroom as he always did, but the lecture went in one ear and sailed merrily out the other. His pen perched over the notebook but didn't make a mark.

The bell sounded at last. Isaac sat there with his chin in his hand staring off into space, as the rest of his classmates chatted and bustled about. Only after most of them had left did he come heavily to his feet.

His head felt like it was filled with mud. He didn't sleep a wink last night. After Tristan had left, he'd sat there on the floor like a fool. He felt like getting good and wasted, but after a few hours had passed, his body resumed its old routines pretty much on autopilot.

Shower, brush his teeth, get dressed. He stopped at a cafe and got a coffee on his way to school. He attended his morning and afternoon classes, engaged in a few meaningless conversations. And then like a programmed robot, made his way to the building that housed the Helsing Group.

He didn't think about anything along the way, paid attention to nothing. The world flowed past him. He couldn't even remember what he ate for lunch.

"Whoa, what's with the scary face?" said Vivian as soon as he walked into the office. "You got circles under your eyes."

"I had a bad night, okay? You don't need to remind me."

"And I shouldn't need to remind you that there's no sleeping on the job. Take it to the break room."

"Work first. Where's today's list?"

"Still collating it. That reminds me, Professor Hopkins called."

"Professor Hopkins?"

Hopkins was the Helsing Group's top researcher. He'd served as Isaac's guardian after his parents died. Though Isaac hadn't seen him around lately.

"Yeah. Something about him having a guest. Said to send you over as soon as you showed up. He's in conference room B. Get going. I'll have the list ready when you're done."

"Okay."

"And Isaac—" she called after him. But he was already out the door. Watching him through the glass partition, Vivian said to herself, "Oh, well. He'll figure it out soon enough."

Isaac headed for the conference room. He knocked on the door and said, "It's Isaac Blanche."

"Come in," said Hopkins.

Isaac opened the door. And halted in his tracks. Directly opposite the doorway, Hopkins sat with his elbows on a long table. Seated on either side of him were the Group's senior research fellows.

"Don't just stand there," Hopkins gestured with his chin. "Come in."

"Excuse me."

Isaac awkwardly closed the door. *What's with the sudden grand inquisition?* He felt cold sweat trickling down his back.

Hunters attached to the Group underwent regular ethical standard reviews, especially when relatively harmless and non-resisting vampires were subjected to unnecessary punishment. And

when untoward fraternization with vampires came to light—that went beyond the call of duty.

No way could what happened last night have gotten out already.

"Well, come on over here."

"Sure—" Isaac nodded reluctantly.

He noticed that a high-backed chair was situated in front of the table. He assumed at first that was where he was supposed to sit. Except as he came closer, he saw that the chair was already occupied.

His eyes were drawn to the silver-gray hair. The face looked up at him. It was Tristan. He gave him a meaningful smile.

Isaac shouted, quite despite himself, "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Somebody you know?" Hopkins asked in a soothing voice.

The rest of the scholars at the table looked on silently. Isaac gulped. Lying would get him nowhere. One glance at Hopkins told him that much. He already knew everything.

Isaac answered sullenly, "He's been assisting me. Helping me out on hunts and crypt searches."

"Thanks to that, he's been a very great help to us. Moreover, this time he has brought us some very compelling information. I imagine he's told you already."

"What would that be?"

"One of the vampire elders is waking from his sleep. Jado."

Isaac glanced at Tristan out of the corner of his eye. Tristan feigned ignorance and avoided his gaze.

"He says he needs help hunting Jado down. The kind of request we'd call heaven-sent."

Isaac rolled his eyes. "This guy's a direct descendant of Jado! And he wants help killing his sire? Does anybody actually believe him?"

"We are choosing to at this time."

Isaac's mouth opened and closed without making any sound.

"What are you saying? You just can't simply—"

"We trust but verify. There is a basis for our beliefs."

"I would sure like to know!"

"There isn't a need for you to know at this time."

An answer that gave him nothing to reply to, no room to object. The matter was already settled. He couldn't even begin to imagine what kind of backroom deal had been struck here. But that didn't mean he had to take it lying down.

"He's the murdering bastard who killed my family! You're saying you knew that going in?"

"He's already made a statement to the police and been arraigned. The Group arranged bail and took him into our custody on the condition that he help take down an elite vampire."

Isaac couldn't believe his ears. He hadn't seen any of this coming at all. Tristan impassively held his tongue. In short, the night before, while he was still recovering from the shock, the little twerp had set all this in motion.

"That is where things stand. As you know, direct descendants do not recognize human authority and human courts have no hold on them. But special provisions in the law do allow for instances of calculated revenge—a death for a death. No more, no less. In this case, as a direct relation to the injured party, this authority resides with Isaac. Or do you wish to abandon the petition?"

"No way!"

Still seated in the chair, Tristan didn't stir. But a small smile rose to his lips. Isaac had to wonder when he had fallen into this well-sprung trap.

"But you are still responsible for his life. You cannot take it before Jado is dealt with. His assistance in this hunt is indispensable. We have one goal before us, and that is the elimination of an elder vampire, Jado. Don't forget that. Do I make myself clear?"

"Crystal."

"Good. Until this hunt concludes, he will be your personal responsibility."

"My responsibility?"

"We've taken steps, but you're the best one to entrust with the policy."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Meaning our insurance against a double-cross."

The aloof Tristan pulled down the collar of his white shirt, revealing a black collar around his neck. Isaac's eyes widened. "A remote-activated guillotine! What the hell is this?"

Tristan answered, as if talking about something or somebody else, "The insurance previously referred to. Try to remove it by force and a laser beam goes *zip*. Because the cut is self-cauterizing, there is little fear of additional infection caused by spraying blood. Very clean."

"Those things are used to control half-mad werewolves and ghouls."

"And vampires can behave even more violently. Have you forgotten, Isaac? I'm the mad killer of three. I exercise self-control as best I can. But when the thirst comes, I make no promises."

Hopkins explained to the dumbstruck Isaac in an unemotional voice, "The registration is all taken care of. Vivian will provide you with the controller. I anticipate that you will exercise judgment soberly. Tristan, best of luck. I'm counting on you."

"Much appreciated."

Tristan stood up and nodded politely. Still pissed, Isaac charged out of the room. Tristan caught up with him in the hallway.

He whispered, "Don't worry. I didn't say anything about last night to anybody."

"Are you talking blackmail?"

"Not at all. I'm telling you my lips are sealed on the subject. So rest easy."

"Huh. You sure know how to put on an act. You kill my family and then you sleep with me. Good show."

"That's the kind of creatures vampires are," Tristan answered softly. He added with a small smile, "We're not human, you know."

Literally. How about it? Really wanted to take me out, didn't you?"

Isaac's head was crammed full of so much directionless anger he was about to explode. What the fuck was the kid thinking?

He murders my family and scurries away. Then eight years later he shows up out of the clear blue, comes onto me, begs me for a job, sleeps with me, and then asks me to kill him?

"Right now I'd like to wring your little neck!" Isaac shouted as he pushed through the door. "So don't go kissing up to me!"

But Vivian spread her arms wide and said invitingly, "Welcome back! I've been waiting! You must be Tristan. Wow, you're even cuter than I imagined."

She clasped her hands together and swayed her hips in girlish delight. Isaac arched his brows. "Jesus Christ, Vivian! It's a vampire, not a doll!"

"We've nothing to do with each other, so what's the harm? Besides, as your valuable sidekick, a friendly professional relationship is in order, no? Hi, I'm Vivian, this idiot's operations manager. Glad to meet you."

"Who exactly is being the idiot here?"

Tristan said to Vivian, "Likewise, and thank you."

"Hey, don't go so casually shaking hands with the likes of him. He's the creep who killed my family? Right now I'd like to obliterate his sorry little ass from the face of the earth."

"Like I said, that's got nothing to do with me. Oh, yes, but when it comes to stuff that *does* have to do with you, here you go—" She tossed him a small object that looked like a cigarette lighter. "The switch to the guillotine. Handle with care. It'd lop off the child's head like a carrot under a meat cleaver."

"Um, how does it work?"

"Like an old-fashioned lighter. Pop the cover, hold the switch down for three seconds. Now, now, don't go testing it out."

"I'm not testing it out!"

"In critical situations—say, a struggle to the death—it can be triggered by pulling this ring on the collar. To guard against

accidental activation, it's got a five-second delay. Well, give it your best shot and all."

"I keep telling everybody, it won't be me!"

"No?" Tristan asked with an innocent expression. "Then how do you intend to kill me?"

"I'll think it about when Jado's dead!"

"I don't think you're going to have a whole lot of time to think about it. Wouldn't it be better to come to a decision beforehand?"

"I don't want to hear about it from you!"

At some point, he had become Tristan's executioner. Even though he was the criminal who'd killed Isaac's family, he had apparently come to this resolution without really knowing how, and it simply didn't sit well with him. Isaac scratched his scalp in irritation.

Vivian ignored him and busied herself getting friendly with Tristan. "Here's your blood allowance. And dehydrated plasma. Just add warm water! Good as the real thing! Or so says an infected person I know."

"Wow, so much to think about."

All this dressing up the ugly in ribbons and bows left a bad taste in Isaac's mouth. He sat down heavily in a folding chair just as Vivian's scolding voice came his way.

"What are you sitting down on the job for, Isaac? Time to get to work! Here's tonight's list. Memorize it and be on your way."

"Why are you letting so many infected people get away? What are you people doing around here?"

"Our hands are full. The number of dormant infections is growing."

"I'm the one with his hands full."

"Let's give it our best." Tristan leaned over the sulking Isaac, slumped in his chair, gave him an upside-down look and grinned.

Isaac yelled, "I told you to keep your distance!"

"For the time being, I'm afraid you must double your efforts."

"Gah—" Isaac spat out.

He got his things and stood up. Behind him Tristan whispered, "You'll just have to put up with me for a little while, Isaac. Then you can kill me and be done with it."

When Isaac reflexively glanced back at him, Tristan flashed a sad little smile. Isaac glared back and then turned on his heels and strode away.

"Jeez, I'm beat," Isaac sighed, collapsing on the table.

They were at a late-night coffee shop. Steam wafted from the coffee in a nearby paper cup.

Himself showing no signs of fatigue, Tristan nursed a cappuccino and said, "A new record. Ten sent back to the hospital in one night."

"New cases are popping up right and left. And they're all just as clueless. We can't even spare the time to chase down any of the minions we stumble across."

"Until the other hunters are out of the hospital, we have to give first priority to new cases."

"And as a result, bounties worth anything are going to the freelance hunters."

"Catch the new cases early enough and even if they can't be healed, their lives can at least be made worth living. That's the more important goal, wouldn't you say?"

"You do have a point." Isaac straightened in his chair. "Speaking of which, how are you holding out?"

"Pretty soon. My blood was taken repeatedly over a long period. Pretty much true of all direct descendants."

"So you developed a fondness for it, huh?"

If so, then why—he wanted to ask, but thought better of it. It wouldn't accomplish anything, and since he was going to kill him anyway, he had no desire to become his confessor first.

Loathing him as the murderer of his family and exploiting him as a useful tool on the hunt was enough. And in the end, he'd be dead. That's all he wanted out of him.

"Isaac, it's getting late. We'd better get going."

"You're free to. I'm going to hang out here for a while."

"So give me the key to your apartment."

"What are you talking about? What do you need my key for?"

"I don't have a place of my own. I moved out."

"Huh? Why?" Isaac was suddenly wide awake.

Tristan grinned. "That's why I'm crashing at your place. Professor Hopkins thought it was a good idea too. Don't worry, all my expenses are covered. I transferred my savings into your account."

"I don't want to hear about it."

"You're in charge of me now. Remember?"

"Tell me why I should be sharing living quarters with my sworn enemy. What, you got such a death wish you're hoping I'll beat you to death in the middle of the night?"

Tristan said sardonically, "Now, we both know *that's* not going to happen. Or do you want a reminder?"

Isaac recalled how easily Tristan had sent him flying with barely a flick of his little finger and ground his teeth. "No thanks!"

"Well, I can come and go as I please. You invited me in, remember?"

Isaac gaped at him. Then slumped over and banged his head on the countertop. Tristan sipped at his coffee.

"Hindsight is always twenty-twenty," he said in a professorial manner.

"You don't need to tell me," Isaac moaned. He was losing the will to live by the minute.

"You're sleeping on the floor," Isaac declared, as soon as they arrived back at his apartment.

"I don't care. But I don't want you tripping over me. And a bit

of a mess for a clean freak like you, no?"

"You're free to take yourself someplace else!"

Ignoring the livid Isaac, Tristan looked around. His eyes stopped on a door on the right-hand side of the hallway. "What's in here?"

"See for yourself."

"Ah, a storage closet."

It was about a yard wide and two yards deep, filled with old newspapers and cardboard boxes and some cleaning supplies.

"This would suit me fine. There's even a light. How about it?"

"It's a storage closet!"

"I could sleep all day here and never be in your way."

"What if I need the vacuum cleaner?"

"Then I'll do it when you're not home."

"Don't go acting like you're in charge!"

"What, you like cleaning?"

"There something wrong with that?"

"No, no, not at all. You'll make a good househusband."

"Nobody asked for your opinion!" Isaac roared, getting more and more ticked off. Having that kid around totally knocked him off his stride. His brain went on the fritz. The other night, thanks to him, he lost his mind and ended up doing *that*. Only because the kid was a freaking head case and he wasn't thinking straight.

"It wasn't my fault!" he spontaneously cried out.

This prompted a double-take from Tristan. "What isn't?"

"Everything! If you want to sleep there, then suit yourself! But don't go sneaking into my room! Got it? It's off limits! If I see you in there, I'll bust your chops!"

"I got it. Good night."

Isaac shoved him out of the way in a blustering manner. Tristan just shrugged and closed the door. Glaring, Isaac stomped down the hall and to his room.

That night, Isaac dreamed dark, shapeless, foreboding dreams.

His eyes flew open. He felt a slender, cool finger stroking his cheek. When he looked up, there was Tristan smiling at him.

I told him not to come in here. Or was this a dream too?

In the haze of half-sleep, drumming up anger wasn't easy. He reached out and touched lips with the tips of his fingers. A soft and vivacious sensation. The sensual sweetness he had indulged in the other night blossomed within him.

Tristan kissed those fingertips many times, then leaned over and pressed their lips together. Isaac closed his eyes and muttered as if to convince himself, "You're doing this. This is your lie, isn't it Tristan?"

Tristan didn't answer. He only smiled a somehow melancholic smile.

Many kisses later, Isaac was seized by a thought. He pressed his thumb against Tristan's upper lip, revealing not sharp vampire fangs, but normal teeth.

Oh, he's just a normal human being. Yes! That whole "vampire" business was just a silly dream.

Isaac was overjoyed. Tristan was a mere human. He'd been living in a nightmare the whole time. Tristan wasn't a vampire. Isaac wasn't a hunter. His family wasn't dead. Everybody was happy and alive, waiting for him to come home.

Before he knew it, he'd returned to his childhood. Isabel had just returned from picking flowers, and was holding a pretty bouquet. *Next year, let's go together. Mom, Dad, I'm home—*

There was nobody in the deserted living room. *Where is everybody?* Isabel must still be getting over her cold.

She wasn't in her room. It was wrapped in purple darkness and in total silence. Isaac felt his anxiety climbing as he raced from room to room, opening the doors.

Where is everybody? Mom? Dad? Isabel?

A hollow *thud* as he flung open the last door. The sound echoed

like malicious laughter off the walls. The red-stained scene unfolded before his eyes.

Within the ocean of blood, his parents lay on top of each other. Isabel lay on her back next to them, staring with vacant, lifeless eyes at the ceiling. Blood continued to fall in *plips* and *plops* from the pair of bite marks in her neck, staining her white pajamas red, drenching the floor and flowing down around her feet.

Isaac tried to retreat. Something—somebody—was blocking him. Turning and looking up, it was Tristan. Scarlet bubbles glistened on his full lips. His white fangs seemed to spill from his mouth.

As he leapt away, the child Isaac returned to his adult form. He drew his gun from its holster.

On the other end of the sights, Tristan laughed. *I did it, Isaac.* He licked the blood off his lips and narrowed his eyes. The engraved incense holder dangled from his fingers on the silver chain. The photograph disappeared into the red sea.

Isaac roared with anger and disappointment. He pulled the trigger. A hole opened in Tristan's head. Black blood poured out. Tears welled up from his wide eyes.

As his face mutated into Isabel's.

Isaac shouted and jumped up, opening his eyes and shaking his head back and forth.

Morning light glowed on the curtains. "Shit. It was just a dream." Isaac grated his teeth and tumbled off the bed. He ran to the storage closet and yanked open the door.

He opened his mouth to shout. But then he noticed Tristan's small body curled up in the small, spare space. He was wearing a single-layer, pre-wrinkled silk top. He was leaning against the vacuum cleaner, hugging his arms around his knees as if to fend off the cold.

"Hey—" Isaac said in a low voice. There was no response. The



bad dream having further shortened his already shortened temper, he kicked the nearby stack of old newspapers and yelled, "Wake up!"

The volume of his voice notwithstanding, there was still no reaction. Recalling his turbulent dreams, Isaac brushed aside the bangs covering Tristan's forehead. No wounds marred the skin. Isaac took a breath and let it out.

Of course.

When vampires slept, for a good three hours at least they were dead to the world. During those hours, they were defenseless against attack. For a vampire, it was a fatal time to be caught alone and unawares. That was why they gave so much thought to where they slept. The safer the better—staffed by minions and guards, and equipped with high-tech security systems.

For the hunters, those hours were the most opportune. Except that the higher the rank of the vampire, the tougher they became, until they were on a par with the hunters, no matter what the circumstances.

Isaac silently looked down at Tristan. So deep was his sleep that Isaac couldn't even hear him breathing. He could kill him easily. Not to mention the execution collar he had willingly put on. The only sure way to kill a vampire was to take his head. A simple stake through the heart was never a sure bet. Maybe for a minion, but not a direct descendant.

Isaac knelt on the floor. He reached out and turned down the collar of Tristan's shirt. At first glance, the collar looked like something worn by a dog. The ring that looked like where a lead could be clipped functioned the same as the pin of a grenade. Pulling it activated the laser beam, which would decapitate him in a second.

So fast he probably wouldn't notice.

The moment his fingertip brushed against the ring, Isaac started and pulled his hand away. He took a deep breath and picked Tristan up in his arms. He carried him to the bedroom and laid him down on the still-warm bed. He pulled up the blankets and for several

minutes more gazed at his sleeping face.

"I'm such a fucking pushover," he murmured.

He dragged himself off the bed and started dressing.

Chapter Five

From Dusk Till Dawn

Vivian was, as always, fashionably dressed to kill. She said patiently, "Okay, just to be sure, let's go through this again."

Isaac didn't scowl, and examined the list until Vivian plucked it out of his hands.

"What?"

"Better to concentrate on new outbreaks. Fussing about stuff like this will get you no closer to nabbing Jado."

"You're the one who gave this job to me."

"That's what I'm saying. I had a chat with Tristan before you got here. Most of the new infections are related to Jado. Kill Jado and you will exterminate the viral line. Eliminate the cause and the effects will follow. Once we're no longer dealing with reborn vampires, none below the level of minion should get caught up in the collateral damage. In short, we can ignore them for the time being."

"Ignore them—"

"In fact, once Jado's line is wiped out, the infected victims requiring immediate attention are down to these." She flipped the sheet of paper around to show him.

"Only two?"

"That's right. Nothing that the police can't handle. I've already contacted them with the particulars."

"In that case, we should have done it from the start."

"Well, I had the logistics for yesterday's hunt planned out and it was too late to go changing things."

"Sorry, Isaac. But it hadn't occurred to me either." Tristan bowed his head in contrition.

Isaac gave him a sideways glance and didn't answer. Vivian broke in, "That's okay, Tristan. It's barely been a day. You go with what you got."

"And what are you kissing up to him for?" blurted out a clearly peeved Isaac.

"Oh, shut up. You've been blowing your top a lot lately. What, not enough calcium in your diet? Milk does a body good, you know."

Tristan said, "Speaking of milk, we were out, so I bought some."

"Oh, did you? Well, knock it off."

Vivian said, "Jesus, you're annoying. The only thing worse than female histrionics is male histrionics."

"Consider things from my perspective. I'm living with the maniac who killed my family."

"You're not *living* with him. You're supposed to be supervising him. As a professional hunter, you need to behave in a more professional manner."

"It's not like he can run away, not when I'm the one holding the guillotine remote."

Bold talk, but it sounded bad in his mouth. A glance revealed that Tristan didn't look so much hurt by it as confused.

"And? So? One way or the other, we've got to settle things before Jado wakes up. Would you have any idea where he is?"

"No idea," Tristan answered nonchalantly.

Isaac gaped. "No idea? What the hell!"

"Keep it down!" Vivian stuck her fingers in her ears.

"So we start with his crib. An elder would have a high-class crib. And how do we go about doing that? Smoking out a minion's crib is hard enough."

"No need. Jado will send them searching for me."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because he needs my blood."

"What so special about it?"

"My blood is a tad—unique." Vivian gave him a suspicious look and Tristan flashed a small smile back at her. "I guess it's a matter of taste."

Vivian shrugged. "Whatever. So you're just waiting for Jado to turn up?"

"Not just waiting. Making appearances at every crypt in the neighborhood. Should be easy to track me down."

"Wait a minute. You're saying that showing me where the crypts are—"

"One of those two birds, one stone type of things."

"You could have filled me in from the get-go!"

"But your crypt database is much more up to date now, isn't it?"

"Ends don't justify the means!"

"Come now," Vivian interjected. "I'd say that in this situation they do. What's the objective now?"

"To dangle a tempting enough bait that will get Jado to stick his nose out."

"Hell," grumbled Isaac. "What do you need me for?"

"Oh, now he's sulking."

"Your job, Isaac, is taking out Jado. No matter what, that's not something I can do."

"Then what are your plans for tonight?" said Vivian, looking at Isaac and then Tristan.

Tristan smiled slyly. "Let's go find us some crypts. We're more likely to be seen there by one of Jado's informants than anywhere else."

They walked into Lucy's Wake and descended the stairs. Isaac asked, "What are we doing here again?"

A step ahead of him, Tristan glanced back over his shoulder and said with a sly grin, "So you'd prefer Rosebud?"

"I'm not going back there again!"

"I'm joking. Anyway, Rosebud isn't a crypt."

"It looks like the casket's open," said Isaac, suddenly taking note.

The ornate sandalwood casket sat upon the low stage. The last time he'd been there, it had definitely been closed. Tonight it was open and filled with lilies. Tristan gulped and gripped Isaac's arm and sidled up to him.

"Hey, don't stand so close to me!"

"*Shhh*. Quiet."

There was no joshing tone in the urgent whisper. Isaac gave him a surprised look. Tristan was scanning their surroundings with sharp eyes.

"What's up?"

"Don't wander off. Lucy is up and about tonight."

"Lucy?" He gazed down at the empty casket. "She was in there?"

Tristan nodded silently as they threaded their way through the excited throngs.

"So, you mean, Lucy wouldn't perhaps be—?"

"The same Lucy that appears in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. Lucy Westenra. She was assaulted by Count Dracula, died, and was reborn as a vampire. After repeatedly attacking children in her quest for blood, she was killed by Professor Helsing."

"Isn't that a novel?"

"Real vampires get a kick out of books and movies about them. You could call this a concept nightclub. But that is only a masquerade put on for the general public."

"Yeah," Isaac shot back, "The ones with bad taste."

"Vampires do, in general, have bad taste," Tristan answered, offering a strange defense of his kind.

"An eternity of self-denial combined with infinite self-esteem. Prisoners of self-abuse and simmering lumps of self-indulgence. Swinging like Poe's pendulum between the extremes, they are the

product of perverse contradictions. Even their sexual profligacy is due more to psychological dependency than nymphomania."

"Huh. Sounds like you could all use a good therapist."

"Those actually exist," said Tristan, deflecting Isaac's sour asides with quiet humor.

Somebody stopped next to them and said, "Yeah, I thought it was you, Tristan. Funny seeing you here!"

A tall girl wearing a goth outfit smiled a bewitching smile. Her black and purple dyed hair was piled high upon her head, with a few curls falling about her shoulders. Eyes fringed with black, eyes like a midnight sea, and tinged with a magnetic charm.

The beads of a black pearl and diamond necklace sparkled against ample breasts that spilled out of the top of her corset. She was wearing black lace gloves and toying with the gleaming, long-stem pipe in her hands. Her wet, red lips turned up at the corners.

Isaac froze for a moment in her gaze. And then Tristan stepped heavily on his foot. Isaac swallowed the angry yowl that rose to his lips. Tristan hooked their arms together and coquettishly snuggled against him.

"Sorry, but this one's mine. Hands off."

"Oh? Sorry." She smiled unapologetically. "And he looks so fresh and tasty."

So fresh and tasty? Was that a compliment?

"I heard that you've been around and about. I guess it's true. Decided it was time to firm up old friendships? When it comes to Tristan, the welcome mat will always be out."

Tristan laughed and skipped around the question.

"So, Elvira, you're playing Lucy tonight?"

"Yes. Did you enjoy the show?"

"Unfortunately, I didn't make it in time. Just got here."

"Aw. You're so mean."

She giggled, leaned over and planted a kiss on his cheek. Her high heels only added to her height. And yet she moved without the slightest show of awkwardness.

"Speaking of which, I heard that Lord Jado will soon be returning from his travels. Do you know if that's true?"

"I'm just as clueless as you."

"Defiant as ever. You'll get your knuckles rapped for sure."

"Not if I keep my distance."

"Duhamel's been looking for you."

"Duhamel?"

"The child wants to become a direct descendant. He seems to think this would be a good way to get in good with Lord Jado. I'd be watching my back if I were you."

"Thanks for the heads up, Elvira."

"I got an encore performance coming up. You must stay around to see."

With a sidelong glance at Isaac and a sway of her hips, she left.

"That's a fine woman, even for a vampire. With that body, she could give Vivian a run for her money."

"That was a guy."

"What?" Isaac spun around as if hit by a strong right jab and sought out Elvira's form, but "she" was already lost among the crowds. "With a chest like that?"

"Silicone, I'd wager. The plastic surgeons are getting good. They feel natural to the touch and are size-adjustable—or so I'm told."

"I don't believe it. Not a hint *he* was anything but a *she*."

"A top of the line set, those."

"You seen them?"

"Well. We should probably get going."

"What are you looking away for?"

"You sure are the jealous type, Isaac."

"I am not jealous."

"Don't worry. I much prefer your type."

"That's not what I was talking about!"

"Well, now that you mention it, I could stand a drink. How

about it?"

"We're on the job!"

"I'd call this a job-related conversation."

Tristan grinned and dragged him to a table in a dimly-lit area at the back of the room. A candle flickered on the burnished metal tabletop. The table was ringed by a padded, sofa-like bench.

Perhaps because of the dear prices, it was a lot less crowded over here. They placed their orders. Tristan snuggled up next to Isaac like they were on a date.

"What are you getting all lovey-dovey for?" Isaac growled, as Tristan pursued him to the edge of the sofa.

Undaunted, Tristan tucked his chin against Isaac's shoulder and said, "I'm not. I'm getting a better look."

"What the hell do you need a better look at?"

"There are a lot more vampires here than last time offering their make-believe condolences. On the prowl for fresh blood, targeting anybody unaccompanied by one of their own. In any case, they prefer someone normal like you to one of those vampire freak bitches."

"Yeah, there's bad taste here to spare," Isaac grunted. "You'd think they could just take it from the ones giving it away for free."

"And where's the fun in that? The thrill of the hunt?"

"Like I keep saying, you guys got more than a couple of screws loose."

Tristan ignored Isaac's petulant attitude. He plucked Isaac's sunglasses from his breast pocket and handed them to him. "Put these on. You're an easy mark."

"I am not an easy mark. I just don't have a lot of experience."

"Want me to step on your foot again?" Grumbling to himself, Isaac put on his sunglasses. It'd be hard to make it any harder to see in the already dim club. But the crowded dance floor and the bar were bright enough that he wasn't left totally blind.

"Is that Elvira person a direct descendant?"

"Yeah."

"Are you close? Kinda looked it. You don't mind wiping him out?"

"Elvira has a different pedigree. Jado's death would have no effect on her. I helped her out a while back. That's all."

"Her? I thought you said she was a he."

"To tell the truth, I'm not entirely sure myself."

"Jesus, remind me not to date a vampire chick even if she's the last person on earth."

"That's why you're better off sticking with me," Tristan said sweetly, gazing up at him from beneath his brows.

"Cut that shit out, already!" Isaac barked. He pushed him away and told himself again that Tristan was the enemy. He was just here to make sure he didn't run or turn traitor.

Unexpectedly, he felt an oppressive pair of eyes on him. He was about to turn and look when Tristan held him back.

"Pretend you don't notice," he whispered in his ear, and brought his mouth up to the nape of his neck.

"Hey—!"

"Keep still. I'm not going to bite you. I'm only pretending to drink your blood."

"K-kinda difficult to keep still when you're doing that."

"Good thing you're wearing sunglasses, eh?"

Tristan made a malevolent kissing sound as he nuzzled Isaac's neck. The hairs on the back of his neck stood up. *Because it's such a turn-off*, he fretfully reminded himself, as if holding up under tremendous hardship.

His eyes shadowed by the sunglasses, he turned his attention to the person who'd been staring at him. It turned out to be a young man the same age as himself. He had on a white jacket over a black shirt with an open collar. In a place crawling with bondage and goth getup, such a mainstream appearance instead made him the center of attention.

"He a vampire too?"

"The aforementioned Duhamel."

"He's giving you one helluva evil eye."

"He hates my guts." Tristan laughed softly. "I'm a living eyesore as far as he's concerned. Duhamel is Jado's puppy and will do whatever his master tells him to."

"Huh."

"And yet he ranks lower than a perverse contrarian like me. That's gotta get under his skin."

"He's not a direct descendant?"

"He's an attendant. Better than being a minion, I suppose. The difference is, direct descendants can make their own minions. Duhamel can't do that. If you can't make minions, no matter what other powers you might possess, you'll never be recognized as a full-fledged member of vampire society. Despite his unquestioned loyalty, he's treated lower than an outsider like me who has no desire to create minions."

"Sounds perfectly illogical to me. Hey, he's coming over."

"*Shhh*. Keep on playing it cool."

Duhamel said, "Been looking for you, Tristan."

The angry voice echoed off the nearby walls. Tristan raised his head and said in peeved tones, "You interrupt me while I'm eating?"

"Lord Jado has summoned you. Come with me. Now!"

"Naw, don't feel like it. If he wants to see me so bad, he's free to come and see me. Name the time and place."

"Bastard. How dare you speak of the Master in such tones!"

"Same goes for you, too," Tristan said with mock horror. "A mere attendant addressing me so—I can't believe my ears!"

A vein throbbed on Duhamel's forehead. His clenched fists trembled. "That a mere street hustler should be a direct descendant—you're a blot on Lord Jado's lineage."

"You are free to sleep with whomever you please. Or maybe you're jealous—you being so far from Jado's affections. Life is unjust, Duhamel. If you were only a few years younger, you might be cute enough."

An uneasy silence followed. With Tristan's arms wrapped around his head, Isaac couldn't see Duhamel's face. But he could feel the cutting edge of his rage and resentment.

"How much longer do you think he will continue to indulge you? When Lord Jado abandons you, you will be no better than dust."

"Well, if you wish to succeed me, you'd better get down on all fours and start kissing ass. I don't think batting your big brown eyes is going to cut it."

"You fucking whore—"

Duhamel spun around in red-hot fury and stomped off. Only when he'd disappeared into the crowds did Tristan allow Isaac to extricate himself.

Tristan said, "Let's go."

"Shouldn't we follow him?"

"No. We're not equipped for a hunt."

Tristan stood up and strode away. At some point, Elvira had ascended onto the stage. She sang in a husky voice as half-naked dancers gyrated around her. Elvira's eagle-sharp eyes saw Tristan and threw him a wink and a kiss.

Tristan waved back and said softly, "Good night, Elvira."

Elvira turned her elegant backside to them and slowly slipped into the casket.

Tristan didn't have much to say on the way home. He walked along in silence, staring at his feet. Being insulted to his face might have taken its toll. Isaac didn't think it was serious enough to worry about. The silence was getting to him.

"Hey, you know, something that Elvira said—about Jado traveling somewhere or something—"

"What? Oh, that. A cover story Duhamel made up. He and I are the only ones who know that Jado's been in a sleep cycle different from his usual."

"Aren't there other direct descendants? What do we do if they choose to interfere?"

"They won't." Tristan stopped, then said, his eyes brimming with a strange kind of compassion, "Alas, I am the only direct descendant. And soon, only Duhamel, a mere attendant, will remain." His mouth formed a crooked smile.

"You took them all out?"

Tristan didn't answer. He resumed walking. And then said, almost as an afterthought, "While the cat was away, this little mouse didn't only play."

"And what does the cat feel about all this?"

"Oh, I'm sure that Duhamel has informed Jado about the demise of his direct descendants. But I don't think he has connected the cause and effect to me. I was always sure to preserve deniability. I spent a lot of time and money setting those dominoes up in a row. And then hired the best hunters to knock them over. If the word got out, direct descendant or no, every vampire on the planet would be gunning for me."

Tristan stopped again and glanced over his shoulder. "But I can't die just yet. Not until Jado is dust." Tristan walked up to Isaac. "After that, you're free to kill me. You're the only one with the right to do so."

Tristan flashed a razor-thin smile, turned around and set off down the alleyway. Lost in his own sullen thoughts, Isaac hurried to catch up. Ahead of them, the lights of the cars flooded down the main avenue.

In the apartment, Tristan started to open the door to the closet. Isaac said brusquely, "Sleep in the bedroom."

"This is fine."

"This isn't a matter of your comfort. That closet is too close to the front door. If you decided to take off while I was sleeping, I couldn't do anything about it."

Tristan said with a small, cynical smile, "I'm not taking off anywhere."

"You think I should take your word for it? Vampires are liars by nature. I don't know how you conned all those professors, but I'm not falling for it."

"Well, if it'll help you sleep better at night, I'll respect your wishes. But you should sleep on the bed. Balancing your hunter and school responsibilities must be taking a terrible toll. I'll be fine camping out in the living room."

"Oh, be quiet. The bedroom is the best place to keep an eye on you. You can't go anywhere except through the living room, and the living room is where I study. And come dawn, you sleep like a log. Don't want to be tripping over you like one either."

"I yield to your superior logic." Tristan grinned and shrugged, and went along with Isaac's clumsy attempts at projecting a surly front. He wasn't interested in playing the game.

Isaac grabbed a blanket and stomped out of the bedroom. Tristan's laughter chased after him.

Chapter Six

Blood And Roses

Several days had passed since Tristan and Isaac started living together. The vampire and the vampire hunter, the killer and the sole survivor—sworn enemies under the same roof.

Given a little thought—given no thought at all, actually—it should have made for an intolerable environment. But it wasn't long before Isaac settled down and returned to his old and comfortable routines.

Or perhaps the appearance of normalcy was his way of escaping from reality. His old way of coping when things started to come to a head was to launch into a fit of cleaning. A kind of neurotic reaction that had started after his parents and sister were murdered—

The house looked like it'd been hit by a cyclone. The beds and walls and even the ceiling were soaked and splattered with blood. Even now, when the images stole into his thoughts, he found it hard to breathe.

He spent most of his free time cleaning. The dirt never had a chance to mount a counteroffensive, but he kept at it. Tristan offered once to help out. That was summarily rejected, so he camped out in the bedroom. And when it came time for the bedroom, without a fuss he moved out of the way.

Except from sundown to past midnight, they rarely saw each other. Or rather, they did their best to avoid each other. Aside from their days off, they only came back to the apartment to sleep. If he didn't have work, after his classes, Isaac studied at the library until closing time, and prepped for hunts at the Helsing Group.

Tristan was usually asleep when Isaac was awake, so they

rarely saw each other in the morning. And on the job, somehow or other they parceled out the face time. And soldiered on through the ten or so minutes after they came home.

Otherwise, the slightest thing could set Isaac off. The anger and loathing over the murder of his family still festered. But there was something entirely separate going on as well.

On the one hand, at the end of another unproductive argument, watching Tristan's unworldly beautiful features cloud over and his bright countenance turn gloomy made him want to drive his fist through the nearest wall.

But on the other, the way he couldn't tear his eyes away when Tristan strode like an ingénue from the bathroom to the bedroom after taking a shower, leaving a fragrant wake behind him, made him want to beat himself unconscious.

The windows were streaked with the rain that had been falling since dawn. Isaac checked the calendar while getting dressed. Today's date was circled in a hasty scrawl. There wasn't a note, but he didn't need one.

After he finished dressing, he peeked into the bedroom. The window faced north and a faint halo of light glowed around the curtains. Tristan looked like he'd just hit the sack. He was lying face down. Still.

Isaac shouldered his nylon tote and grabbed his keys and left. Tristan had his spare. He hadn't wanted to give it to him, but didn't have a choice. He again felt those distant echoes of discord in his heart. He was getting irritated at the smallest things these days. And all this evidence of his own immaturity pissed him off all the more.

Isaac opened the umbrella and stepped into the rain.

"Yo, Isaac," Ed said as he got up from his desk. "How about we go someplace tonight?"

"Where?"

"I got four tickets to a sneak preview. Joan and Grace are in. How about we make it a foursome?" Ed added under his breath, "Fact is, Grace has got a thing for you. What do you say? Feeling's mutual, no? I heard you say before you thought she was hot." He gestured with his chin.

Two coeds were standing elbow to elbow against the wall of the classroom, looking back at them. The shorter of the two was Grace. She was rather cute, with her big brown eyes and fluffy soft curls. Her small face was not heavily made up. Her pastel dress fit her well.

She noticed Isaac checking her out. She blushed slightly and waved back.

"What do you say? Wanna come?"

"Sorry, but—"

"What? No way, man. And we're going out for drinks later."

"Can't make it. There's things I gotta do."

"Work?"

"Yeah. Something like that."

Ed knew that Isaac was paying his own way. Isaac kept the vampire hunter business low key. His cover was that he was a security guard on the graveyard shift.

Ed shrugged.

"Yeah, too bad. Well, them's the breaks. I'll ask around." He wagged his finger at Isaac. "Don't blame me if somebody else grabs her."

Isaac responded with a thin smile and left the classroom alone, prompting a sigh of disappointment from the girls. He hurried off campus and caught a bus. The rain hadn't let up in the slightest. It was still daylight, but the cloud cover had created an early dusk.

He took the bus to a block surrounded by a high fence. The twelve-foot fence could be mistaken for a castle wall. In fact,

there was another city behind these walls. The city of the dead. A necropolis.

New Babylon's famed "hidden" cemetery. The gate was a short distance from the bus stop. Next to the gate—rain or shine—was a flower stand. The rain beat on the tarp protecting it from the elements. Isaac bought a bouquet of red roses. A luxury for a starving college student, but the one expenditure Isaac didn't begrudge.

Most of the flowers sold at the stand were roses. In this city, roses were the flower of the dead. Any others were regarded as mere ornamentation.

The cemetery was open from dawn to dusk. A white-haired old man stared out from the small guard house. The cemetery didn't get many visitors or tourists on days like this. He had a lot of time on his hands.

There were good reasons for this cemetery becoming a tourist attraction—because of the unusual grave makers. Many of them were abnormally large. They weren't the customary crosses and squarish tombstones. Rather, they'd been turned into small stone chapels.

No two were exactly the same. The smallest could admit several adults with room to spare. The rows of elaborately-wrought gravestones on either side of the orderly and neatly-groomed paths gave the place the look of an urban necropolis populated by little, fairy tale houses and magnificent temples.

They were locked, admitting only family. But the place could be treated like an open-air museum. An interesting place to visit—providing the weather was good.

These weren't individual graves but family plots. The casket was placed in the center of the mausoleum. When the next generation came to join it, the last was moved down to the catacombs where they continued to sleep.

Nobody knew when the practice of building such elaborate graves began. In spite of the space problems, it showed no signs of going out of fashion.



No new graves were being built. That meant a lively market in buying and selling the used properties of the dead. When a family line died out or the descendants moved away, the brokers descended like vultures. When a property changed hands, the previous residents would be shipped lock, stock and barrel to a mass grave outside the city.

Having a grave in the city of the dead was an envied status symbol.

It was nothing Isaac wished to boast about, but his family plot was located here. He visited every year on schedule, on the day he'd been made an orphan. The day eight years ago when vampires had slaughtered his family.

Isaac stopped before the grave marker. Somebody was already standing in front of the columns of the shrine-like tomb, without an umbrella, in the pouring rain. He must have been there for some time. His shirt was soaked through and the cold water spilled down from his bangs.

Sensing his presence, the person raised his bowed head and glanced over his shoulder. Seeing Isaac clearly startled him. Isaac practically exploded with rage. He strode up to Tristan and slapped the bouquet of roses across the side of his face.

With a short cry of pain, Tristan stumbled backward. Isaac roared, "What are you doing here?"

Tristan averted his gaze. He didn't answer. The petals stripped from the roses clenched in Isaac's hand scattered onto the wet ground. The sound of falling rain filled the empty silence.

"Get out of my sight!" Isaac spat at him.

He got out his key, and opened the door to the mausoleum. He pressed a switch on the wall and the door closed behind him. An incandescent light shaped like a candle cast a dim gleam across the darkness. Isaac placed the bouquet on the altar and gathered up the dried leaves and stems left behind from last year.

Isaac tidied up in silence. He remembered the white flower left outside the door to the mausoleum the year before. Left outside

the door every year since his family died. And probably this year. He'd been too angry to notice.

Unbelievable. *Him*—?

He stepped outside. There next to the entrance was a crushed white rose. He'd missed it coming in and stepped on it. He looked up. Tristan was still standing there in the rain. Isaac picked up the rose and threw it at him.

The skeletal remains of the flower struck him in the chest and dropped to his feet, the white petals stained brown by the splashing mud.

"Never again." His voice, hoarse with anger, burned at his throat.

Tristan stared down at the white rose petals floating in the muddy water. Rivulets of water falling from his silver-gray hair streamed down his cheeks like tears. He said in a muffled voice, "This is the last time." He turned his white face to Isaac. "A year from now, I will not exist."

He spoke quietly, and that enraged Isaac all the more.

"What is this, an offering to the dead? Penance? Regret?" He struck the door with his fist. "All the regret in the world won't bring them back. My father, my mother, my sister—she was my twin. Isabel and I were born together, grew up together. She was my other half. What do you know about the pain and sorrow of having that torn away!"

His voice broke into bitter laughter. "You know, there's nobody in here? An empty tomb. I'm sure you know why. To keep them from coming back, anybody who dies at the hands of a vampire is decapitated and cremated and their ashes scattered in the river. So they don't come back as a minion. An age-old custom. The same with my parents and my sister. Being killed by a vampire is cruel enough. But to be beheaded and burned on top of that—There are no remains. The caskets contain only mementoes left from their lives. My father's reading glasses. My mother's favorite dress. Isabel's teddy bear. That's all. That is all that's left of them."

"That is why you became a hunter," Tristan said in a dispirited whisper, his eyes downcast.

Isaac glared at his ashen face. "Ah, yes. These are the kind of feelings that, God help me, I'd like to put an end to!" He walked away, splashing through the puddles. He shot a last look back at him. "You just gonna stand there forever? You're a disaster. Shit, seeing you makes me want to throw a bucket of salt over my shoulder."

That bit at the end was said as much to himself as in anger. But Tristan seemed unable to move, standing there forever in front of the grave. Which annoyed Isaac all the more. He grabbed Tristan roughly by the arm and marched him off.

"Move your damned feet! You're not a fucking invalid!"

The twilight deepened. The rain fell harder. Tristan trudged along next to Isaac, the other half of his body exposed to the elements.

Isaac stood in the entranceway, the water dripping off him. "Dammit. I'm soaked to the skin."

He felt like he'd gone swimming with his clothes on. He didn't feel like he'd come out of the rain. He felt like he'd been standing under a waterfall.

Isaac brushed back the hair plastered against his face with an annoyed flick of his hand and pulled off his shirt. He wrung it out in the bathtub. It was like he'd just pulled it out of the washing machine.

Stripped to the waist, Isaac toweled off his hair and stepped into the hallway. Tristan was still standing in the foyer.

"What are you doing?"

"I don't want to get the floor wet."

Isaac threw the towel at him. "Go take a shower. You were standing in the rain for a long time. If you get sick, it's gonna make it harder for me to do my job."

"I haven't caught a cold in a hundred years."

"Shut up!" Isaac bellowed. "And do what I tell you!"

Tristan quietly and obediently disappeared into the bathroom.

"Ah, shit," Isaac said. "I left my shirt in the tub." The water wasn't running so he brusquely announced, "I'm coming in."

Tristan's well-proportioned white legs caught his eye. He'd bared his damp lower extremities and was in the process of stripping off his clinging shirt. He glanced at Isaac, showing no signs of surprise.

The sodden shirt revealed the pale skin beneath. The small, strawberry-like buds stood up against the near-transparent fabric. Isaac averted his eyes and grabbed the shirt draped over the edge of the tub.

He was turning to leave when Tristan gently touched his elbow. Not intending to stop him, but Isaac stopped anyway. He felt Tristan's moist cheek pressed against his back. Tristan's arms circled his chest and hugged him tightly.

"Let go—"

He intended it as a shout, but it came out trembling and hoarse. Tristan didn't reply, except to press his lips against his skin. His mouth trailed across his back, raising small kissing sounds. His hands played across Isaac's chest, brushing his nipples, making Isaac knit his brows.

Tristan took his hands away, only to again apply his fingertips to his skin with more tantalizing strokes, as he continued to kiss and caress his back.

His other hand slipped between Isaac's legs and pressed against his bulge through the damp cloth, producing an almost painful shock of pleasure. The sound of the rain echoed through the ventilation fan into the quiet bathroom, mingling with the sound of sweet kisses.

Slender, white fingers undid the wet belt and pulled down the zipper. Isaac looked down at himself as if he was somebody else.

None of this seemed real. But when the cool fingertip touched him directly, reality returned with a start.

The piercing flash of cold fire made Isaac throw his head back. The chill vanished and the skilled, sensuous strokes stoked the fires of his pleasure and pushed him beyond the bounds of his self-control. He gritted his teeth and panted out cloudy breaths.

"Isaac—" said Tristan, his cheek fast against his back.

The pleasure trembled through his chest. Tristan unclenched his hand and slid it across his chest. The moist, surging sensation made Isaac spontaneously close his eyes.

With slippery fingers, Tristan toyed with his nipples. He whispered again. "Hold me."

He took hold of Isaac's arms and drew them back. Isaac clasped his hands to his cool, rain-wet ass and clumsily kneaded the flesh and Tristan urged him on, his warm breath spilling from his mouth. And not only him. Isaac's mounting desire was plain to see.

He turned and drew their hips and mouths together. He could think of nothing except exploring the sweetness of that mouth. The saliva spilling warm and luscious from Tristan's lips tasted like honey.

He sucked on those lips until they were full and round and red. Tristan looked up at Isaac with his enchanting, caramel-colored eyes. That innocence and cherubic sparkle kindled within him a desire that bordered on pain.

Isaac impatiently ripped off the shirt clinging to his damp skin and pushed the naked Tristan to face the wall. He seized his slender hips from the rear and pulled them to him. Without resisting, Tristan leaned forward, pressing his hands against the cold tile and sticking out his ass.

Parting his translucent white buttocks, Isaac exposed his hidden cleft. Tracing its circumference with the tips of his fingers prompted a flush of red to darken Tristan's face. Despite his bold, come-hither behavior, when the time came he proved strangely bashful. The stark contrast provoked in Isaac a touch of sadistic glee.



Prodding with the tapered tip of his tongue produced from Tristan a strained shriek. He made as if to get away and Isaac grasped his waist all the tighter.

"N-no—tongue—"

"Stop squirming," Isaac commanded, massaging the tense cheeks.

Tristan bit his lip and squeezed his eyes shut as Isaac lapped loudly on purpose, dripping wet, loosening him little by little. Tristan's short, ragged pants filled the bathroom.

"You like this—"

"Ahh—ahh—no—"

"Liar. Look at the way your legs are shaking all over." He licked the line of his bottom, unleashing from Tristan a cry of joy. "Listen to that unbridled lust. You like being diddled like this so much?"

Tristan bit his lips and shook his head vigorously.

"Confess. If you don't, I won't penetrate you." He kissed his backside noisily. "You want me to take you?"

Tristan nodded, trembling.

"Then say it. How do you like it?"

"—inside me—"

"How inside you?"

"Ahh—lick me—"

"You like that?" Isaac said with wicked delight. "What a little slut you are."

He thrust his tongue into the soft, pink folds. Tristan moaned and twisted his torso. Tears squeezed from the corners of his eyes. His gasps clouded the tile, warming the cool surface with each breath.

"Duhamel said so, didn't he? Even when it comes to randy vampires, you're a fucking whore."

Tristan attempted to answer but could only groan and nod, furrowing his brow and puffing out breath in hot bursts. At some point, a ruddy glow began to creep across his chill white skin, the

arousal and bashfulness revealed by the blood throbbing beneath his glassy cheekbones.

As Isaac teased the pliant and pleated flesh with his tongue, Tristan's loins suddenly trembled and convulsed. Semen splashed against the wall. Watching the white lines sliding down the wall and between his legs, Isaac got to his feet and gave the hard ass a sharp slap.

Tristan's body quivered. Isaac buried his chin against his shoulder and gazed down at his slippery wet body. "No coming without permission."

"Ahhh—" he apologized, as if on the verge of weeping.

Isaac spread his butt cheeks and without any warning penetrated him. A clenched scream burst from Tristan's throat. His teary eyes flew open wide. Isaac plunged in deeper. The reflexive tightness produced a dizzying rush of pleasure.

His head flung back, Tristan pressed against the wall as if to cling to the grout between the tiles. Every unforgiving thrust pushed Tristan's cheek against the cool tile. A thin trickle of saliva dripped from the corner of his mouth. His sharp white fangs jutted out from between his lips.

Isaac ran his fingers along the black collar. "You want to suck some blood? Fine with me. A taste before you die. The same blood you tasted eight years ago."

Tristan shook his head in distress. Tears wetted the edges of his tightly shut lashes as Isaac tortured him without respite. Vulgar cries of pain and pleasure reverberated in the small room. Isaac reached around in front of them and grasped Tristan's rejuvenated erection.

"Hnnn—"

Tristan tossed his head and groaned. Isaac's hand encircled his neck. He grasped Isaac's wrist with his willowy fingers. The saliva spilling from his mouth plopped onto his arm. Leaning over his back, Isaac closed his teeth around Tristan's delicate earlobe.

A thin, high scream escaped his mouth before Tristan could

clench his lips together again.

Isaac's lower abdomen smacked against Tristan's ass with a wet slapping sound. The lewd noise only amplified the merciless intensity of the arousal. Scorching flesh rubbed against rough skin, the stimulations pulsing in time to their unconscious breaths. Entwined around his erection, Isaac's fingers grew sticky with Tristan's honey.

A flash of white shot through his head. And then a tidal wave of pleasure. He felt the hot fountain gushing in his palm. Isaac tightened his hold and stroked him harder and he pushed deeper and emptied his endless desire inside of him.

When he finally let go, Tristan collapsed to the floor.

Isaac turned on the shower. Cold water pelted onto his back. Tristan shrieked and curled up in a fetal position. Goose bumps came on out his skin.

The water soon turned warm. When Tristan had sufficiently thawed out, Isaac pulled him to his feet. Tristan looked at him with frightened eyes. Feelings of anger and guilt warred inside of him. The water ran down their bodies. Isaac kissed him. Exploring the depths of his mouth, he caressed his warm, wet back.

The steam wrapped around them as they kissed and kissed again. Tristan's body trembled. He somehow seemed so fragile. Isaac knew that was an illusion. But it still made his heart hurt.

The dim, steam-filled bathroom separated itself from the rest of the world, separated from both past and present. There was only *now*, and the mutual affection that permeated the entirety of their senses.

After the shower washed away the remnants of the rain and their lovemaking, they coupled again. Only more slowly this time, tangling together at a measured pace and rhythm seemingly calculated to arouse their bodies all the more.

Isaac carried Tristan back to the bedroom. He was too exhausted to stand, and Isaac intended to bed him down for the rest of the night. But he stopped himself on his way out the door, and did the deed in the bedroom too.

He couldn't ignore the fact that he was indulging himself to an insane degree. The pleasures of the moment swept away everything else. Looking down at Tristan's limp body, drained by the boundless pleasures, he felt not satisfaction but painful self-loathing.

Marring his pale cheeks—still wet with his tears—were the red trails left by the thorns, from when he'd lost it at the cemetery and struck him with the bouquet of roses. Looking closer, on the back of Tristan's hand, the wood of the rose had, at some point, left behind a faint red scar.

The stinging aftertaste of guilt at the back of his throat made him flinch.

The first time he'd held Tristan like that, he'd been enveloped by a mutual sense of contented happiness that lingered in the intoxicating afterglow. Now his heart was filled with nothing but bitter despair.

Isaac couldn't bear being there and slid off the bed. He got a bottle of water from the fridge. After a bit of pacing, he returned to the bedroom and sat on the floor. He leaned against the side of the bed and took a drink of water. He didn't want to be there. But he didn't want to be anywhere else.

He felt Tristan stirring and glanced over his shoulder. Tristan smiled back with half-dazed eyes. Isaac looked away and took another swig of water. "You couldn't sleep?"

"A bad dream," said Tristan, as if he still hadn't completely woken up. "An old dream. When I was still human. I'll soon forget all of it."

The plastic bottle deformed under the pressure of Isaac's fingers. Without looking, he passed the water bottle to Tristan. Tristan sat up and took it. The water splashed in the half-empty bottle.

"Why does it have to be you?" Isaac muttered, not turning

around. "Why you?"

Silently, the white hand handed the bottle back to him.

"It's all a lie, right Tristan? A lie. I'm fine with lies. Tell me it's a lie!" He cried out in desperation and slumped forward, burying his face in his hands.

He felt Tristan's forehead pressed against his back through the thin fabric of his T-shirt. "I'm sorry."

The whispered voice hit him like a sledgehammer. Isaac rested his forehead on his knees. The tears he hadn't cried for so long poured out of him, and were soaked up by the soft cloth of his sweat bottoms.

The quiet warmth of Tristan against his back felt as cruel and unforgiving as a hard steel blade.

Chapter Seven

Sangre Eterna

When the morning broke, Tristan fell into a deep slumber. And Isaac went to school. Seeing that defenseless and somehow sad face, he was seized by the sentimental impulse that he shouldn't be left alone.

Isaac insistently lectured himself: he's a vampire and my blood enemy and his fate is sealed. That made sleeping with Tristan a warped kind of revenge. That's what he preferred to think at the moment. Otherwise, the whole house of cards would collapse.

It couldn't be love. If it was, then that love was nothing more than a delusional infatuation. And that delusion had shattered into pieces. All that remained was loathing and retribution.

Walking through campus after his classes, Isaac chucked his cell phone—he'd taken it out at some point to make a call—into his bag along with his notebook and books. His spirits hadn't lifted any by the time he walked out onto the street. A red car glided up next to him and decelerated. The streamlined shape of a fine-looking sports car.

The passenger side window rolled down. A perfectly dolled-up Vivian flashed him a vivacious smile from the driver's seat. "Yo, Isaac. Come along for a ride."

For whatever perverse reason, a sliver of garter belt peeked out from her painted-on skirt. It sported a butterfly design in rhinestones. Isaac shrugged and got in.

He said, "You fishing for something with that bait?"

"Alas, it's just for show. Cute, don't you think?"

"Not when you end up with a shark on the hook."

"I'm equipped for every occasion."

"Don't you have work?"

"I'm on the job right now."

Isaac let out a sulky sigh.

"This ain't *Charlie's Angels*."

"Oh, blah, blah, blah. Give it a rest. Your virtue's safe with me." Vivian flashed him a flirtatious glance. The corners of her ruby red mouth drew up in a meaningful smile.

"What?"

"Good question."

"If you've got something on your mind, then spit it out."

"Hmm. I wonder if that would be wise."

"Bitch," he mumbled, sinking morosely back in his seat.

"Thanks," Vivian cheerfully laughed.

"That wasn't a compliment."

"All joking aside, you in the mood for a serious conversation?"

"How serious?"

"It has to do with Tristan, of course. Do you really think he's the bad guy here?"

"He's said as much. And he has evidence."

"You mean your sister's locket. Well, that may place him at the scene, but it doesn't mean he had a hand in what happened."

"Oh, please. You trying to tell me he didn't do it, but insists he did? Not to mention that—"

Isaac suddenly clammed up. Vivian kept her eyes on the road and only shrugged. "I really don't want to know. But something doesn't quite sit right, does it?"

"What doesn't?"

"If Tristan was the monster he says he was, no matter how much he may have reflected and repented and sworn never to do it again, don't you think the professors were awfully quick to give him the benefit of the doubt? Whatever their other faults, they are the specialists here. Vampires don't just drink blood for nutritional reasons."

"A literal lust for blood, you mean?"

"Literally. Vampires want to take the blood of their victims during sex. It is the root of all their pleasures. Everything that feels good is tied to blood—the taste, the smell, the color, the heat, the touch. And the sound it makes coursing through the veins."

"This conversation is creeping me out."

Isaac really did feel sick to his stomach. The blood-smeared scene rose up in his mind's eye. He rolled down the car window to get a breath of fresh air.

"What? I'm not telling you anything you don't already know. Nothing could be more stupid than judging a vampire by his looks. No matter how cute that kid looks on the outside—"

"I know!" Isaac shot back, making no effort to hide his annoyance. "He's a serial killer and a sex maniac. No news there."

Vivian said with an exasperated shrug, "I wouldn't go that far."

"Then what are you saying?"

"That we're in it up to our eyeballs. Professor Hopkins says he's a Chevalier. That's why we can trust him."

"He's a what?"

"The word originally referred to a French knight. It means a defender of the lineage of his arch-enemies."

"The arch-enemies of vampires? That's a legend. And why would a vampire defend such a lineage? It's an oxymoron!"

"That's why a Chevalier and his arch-enemy's family line—" Vivian suddenly shouted and slammed on the brakes. "Yes! That's it!"

Wheels squealed against blacktop as the cars behind her swerved to avoid a collision. Isaac lurched against the seat belt. "Are you trying to kill us?"

"I remembered! Yes, that's exactly what it is." Vivian slid the car into the left-hand turn lane. Honking horns reverberated around the intersection.

"This is the last time I'm letting you drive me anywhere!"

"Oh, don't worry. I have a Class A commercial driver's license, you know."

"What's this big revelation of yours?"

"I remembered. The first time we met, I was sure I'd seen something about Tristan before."

"Probably saw him at one of the nightclubs where he hangs out."

"Naw, I wouldn't have forgotten something like that. It's not every day that you see a cute kid like that at the watering holes around here."

"Or at an informant's meeting with one of the professors—"

"Wouldn't have forgotten that either. No, this is something completely different."

"Then what?"

"I want you to see with your own two eyes."

With a screeching of tires, Vivian swung the car around and into a parking lot. As it turned out, she dragged him—practically by the scruff of his neck—to the municipal art museum.

"The art museum? What the hell?"

"Shut up. You'll see."

Vivian bought two tickets and set off at a brisk pace. It was about closing time, and the crowds were thinning out. Vivian's heels clicked loudly against the polished marble floors.

"They're holding a special exhibition, putting pieces on display not normally seen in public."

Vivian came to a halt before a life-sized portrait of a family of four relaxing in their living room. Based on their dress and the furnishings, it was a family of no modest means.

"Here we go."

"What about it? It's just a picture of a bunch of rich people."

"Take a closer look," she said a bit crossly.

Isaac grudgingly focused his attention on the painting. The family was seated on a luxurious sofa behind a low, round table. At first, it struck him as utterly ordinary for their station and class.

The father was smoking a pipe in fine aristocratic fashion. The smiling mother was embroidering. A girl in her early teens was reading a book that was open in her lap. A boy in his late teens—her brother, no doubt—was looking at the book over her shoulder.

Isaac's eyes came to a halt on the boy's face. Almost before the realization hit his brain, his eyes flew open wide. He stared unblinkingly.

"What the—"

He was the splitting image of Tristan. Or rather, the actual thing. The only thing different was the color of his hair. The boy in the painting had jet-black hair.

"Well? Pretty good likeness, don't you think?"

"Sure, but whether that's really him—"

"Read the title."

Isaac shifted his gaze. The title was written on a small brass plate attached to the frame: *The Fontanier Family in their Living Room*. The name of the artist was not given.

"Fontanier?" Isaac craned his neck to the side. The name sounded familiar.

Vivian launched into an explanation. "Fontanier was the mayor of New Babylon a hundred years ago. This is the portrait he commissioned of his family."

It suddenly came to him, and Isaac nodded. "Wasn't the whole family killed by vampires?"

"Yes. At the time, the vampires were way out of control and the humans didn't have many ways of fighting back. The instinct was to bow and scrape and therefore live as long as possible. Fontanier alone insisted on negotiating as an equal. He produced results and garnered support. He was treated favorably by the small number of moderate vampires, but was a pain in the ass to the rest, who treated humans as objects of contempt. Then one day, he was murdered along with his family. To this day, the identity of his assailants remains unknown. Though vampires are considered the likely suspects."

Vivian spoke to a nearby security guard. The guard called a

museum curator. When the curator arrived, Vivian asked her, "Would you happen to know the name of the boy in the painting?"

"Oh, yes." The fashionably-suited young woman smiled. "The girl reading the book is Letitia. The boy behind her is Tristan."

Isaac gulped. "Like I said," Vivian said under her breath.

She left the museum at a brisk clip and got into her car. Isaac hurried to catch up with her. He still hadn't sorted out his thoughts. "But that doesn't necessarily mean that this Tristan is that Tristan."

"Why not?"

"Because the Fontaniers were all cremated and their ashes cast in the river, right? That's the way they do things around here. Tristan couldn't have been reborn as a vampire."

"I can't say for certain without investigating the particulars of the case, but he is definitely Tristan Fontanier. Like I told you, a Chevalier is a vampire born from the family of their blood enemy."

"Why the hell would you make a vampire from a blood enemy?"

"Boy, you are thick sometimes. It's not like 'blood enemy' is written all over their face. They look just like any other normal person. Even a vampire can't know if the person he is attacking will become a blood enemy until after the fact. Besides, not all of the descendants of such a family have the gifts and ability to resist the vampires."

"But blood enemy or not, they won't turn into a vampire."

"Women won't. Men will. Of a heretical sort. Women are carriers of the gene. Men can inherit it, but can't pass it on. That's what makes it so hard to tell whether a family will produce a blood enemy. When all is said and done, it might be better to call it the surviving portion."

"Like how?"

"Most family lines are patrilineal. Over time, the daughters disappear from the pedigree and assume other surnames through marriage."

"So the blood enemy wasn't in the Fontanier lineage."

"That's right. His wife, Marie-Rose, carried the gene. And their daughter Letitia. And for that generation only, the boy Tristan. So he would have become the heretic. He does not possess an absolute, implanted devotion toward his sire."

"But he said he couldn't kill Jado, that it was absolutely forbidden."

"It is not unusual for vampires to be deprived of a murderous intent toward their direct ancestors." Vivian thumped the steering wheel with obvious irritation. "That's why I can't entirely go along with the story—attacking your family. There's no way a Chevalier would do something like that. He's not some flighty underling who would give in to his cravings on the spur of the moment."

"But Fontanier's whole family was destroyed. So who protected him?"

"Fontanier had another daughter. Three siblings. The oldest—Tristan's older sister—married young and had already left the family. That's why she wasn't available for the posing. At the time of the incident, she wasn't even living in the city."

Vivian gave Isaac a sideways glance. "Her name was Gertrude. Strike any bells?"

"You mean, Gertrude Darvari, discoverer of the G vaccine?"

"To be sure, it was a co-discovery. She provided her genealogical information to the Helsing Group. After her husband died, she returned to New Babylon and married a researcher with ties to the incident. Together, they discovered the only anti-viral compound effective against the vampire strain. Likely in order to protect her identity, her records were classified top secret and sealed. That's as much as I've been able to uncover. But it seems that she had a child after she remarried. His or her whereabouts remains unknown. But Tristan is suspected to have some connection to the descendants."

"Do the professors know this?"

"They know more than I do. They've known about Tristan all along. That's why they're so willing to trust him."

"Then why didn't they tell me? It sounds to me like they have something to hide."

"If a Chevalier still exists, they'd want to protect its identity."

"One of those need-to-know things. And maybe it's better that way."

"It's a puzzle to me, too. Except that I suspect the truth is entirely different than what we've been told."

"So long story short, Tristan isn't some sort of sociopath?"

"I can't say either way for certain. But I'd bet on no."

Isaac stared blankly out the window at the passing streets and houses. "So what's he lying for then?"

"Why indeed?" Vivian wondered aloud. "You really can't imagine any possibilities?"

Isaac sank back into silence. He listened to the sounds of the traffic, the honking of horns. His head was racing a mile a minute and going nowhere. This sudden influx of new information was all brand spanking-new. Tristan had done his best to convince Isaac that he was a foe worthy of his hatred. Why had he gone to such lengths?

What game are you playing, Tristan? Why do want me to kill you?

Isaac hit his knees with his fists. "Vivian, I—"

"Stop!" Vivian held up her hand like a cop directing traffic.

"Say no more."

But Isaac soldiered on regardless. "We slept together."

"Dammit. I didn't need to hear that." Vivian sighed.

Isaac stared at his hands. "He didn't take my blood. I know he wanted to. But he resisted the urge. There's something awfully endearing about that. I could believe that he honestly liked me, and I really liked that."

"Hence a reason to lie, no? You wouldn't have agreed to go after Jado otherwise, would you? No matter how diligent a hunter and civil servant you may be, I don't think you would have taken

him up on his offer otherwise."

Isaac scratched his head in frustration. "I just don't get it. If he's a Chevalier, then what about Gertrude's descendants? Why isn't he protecting them? And on top of that, killing an elder and his sire will kill him. Pretty irresponsible, if you ask me."

"Ask him. Don't you think it's about time?"

Isaac looked up. They were approaching the building that housed the Helsing Group. Vivian waved to the security guard and drove into the underground parking garage.

They took the elevator up to the office. When the doors opened, an anxious voice awaited them. "Isaac, something terrible has happened!"

The flustered man was an operations manager who worked with another hunter. Isaac thought, *Wait a minute, wasn't he assigned to office jobs these days? What's he doing here?*

"Your apartment got firebombed!"

"Bombed? What are you talking about?"

"The details are still coming in. It seems an explosive device was thrown through the window."

"An explosive device?"

The normally detached Vivian grew unusually grave. Isaac seized the disconcerted man. "What about Tristan?"

"We haven't been able to contact him. His cell phone is off or out of range. According to the police, they found traces of blood, indicating that somebody was hurt. But whoever it was, they're not there now."

"He could have made it out under his own power," Vivian said, as if she was trying to convince herself as well. "He might be heading here right now."

Isaac nodded. "He's still wearing that collar. It's got an embedded remote."

Vivian snapped her fingers. "That's right! I'll do a search." She hurried over to her desk, and pounded on her computer keyboard and activated the GPS system.

"Got it! I'm getting positive life signs. At least he's still alive."

Everybody sighed with relief.

"He's on the move. Huh, that's odd—"

"What is?"

"He's not moving toward us. He's moving away from us, toward the outskirts. What the hell is he up to?"

"He's being taken somewhere. This stinks of Duhamel's handiwork."

"Isn't Duhamel one of Jado's lackeys?"

"Yeah. We ran into him at a club. He made a lot of threats."

Isaac busied himself at a locker in the corner, getting out his hunting equipment. He strapped on his holster and loaded up a magazine of hawthorn bullets.

When he took a long sword from the back of the locker, along with a scabbard he could strap to his back, Vivian interjected. "Whoa. That hasn't been consecrated, has it?"

"That's never been good for anything but peace of mind anyway. When it comes to elders, holy water is as good as spit. I've always relied on rosewater."

Some time ago, Tristan had given him his rosewater. Isaac had divided it up into small bottles he kept in a pouch. He put on his headset and turned to leave.

"I'm taking my bike. Direct me there."

"Got it." Vivian nodded, her face unusually tense.

With a half-wave salute, Isaac sheathed the sword and ran down the hallway.

Several hours earlier that day...

At about the same time Isaac got into Vivian's car, Tristan was finally waking up from a deep sleep.

He pulled on a pair of Isaac's pajamas and slouched into the kitchen to make some coffee. He sat on the end of the couch with his knees drawn up. His body felt sluggish and heavy, but it wasn't really fatigue. His heart was torn and his spirit cloudy.

"Yeah, it was a bad idea all along," he said to himself. Sleeping with Isaac, to start with. Hooking up with him was less a matter of allure than one of abuse. At the end of the day, Isaac had to want to kill him. To that end, he needed to make himself loathsome. He had to piss him off.

That time—Tristan should have hit him where it hurt and humiliated him badly. He was at least capable of that. He was a lot more sexually experienced than Isaac. He could have easily had him by the balls—literally. So why didn't he?

That time—when Isaac kissed him, an unquenchable desire was born within him. He wanted to sleep with him. He wanted to fuse their bodies together and lose himself in the mutual ecstasy.

He was the one who had succumbed to the temptation. To fall into his arms, to surrender to his desires and be so thoroughly made love to—he had never tasted joys and pleasures like this before.

At the same time, he was gripped by a depthless despair.

He'd been forced to realize that he was not human. He was a terrible monster that fed on humans. Which was why he had to die at Isaac's hand, regardless of the lies and slanders he had to tell.

Isaac's wounds would heal in time. Isaac would be released from the bonds of a tragic curse and start moving toward a new and better life.

If Tristan could believe that he'd been loved from the heart—even for a mere hour or so—that would be enough. The short time they had shared on this sofa. That time had frozen into a brilliant crystal inside his chest.

The repeated kisses, the hard throbbing and the soft warmth.

"Isaac—" Tristan covered his face with his hands and whispered, "I'm sorry—"

The shattering of glass cruelly drowned out the words. Tristan stared at the black, round object rolling across the floor. His body reacted and started to move on its own when a blinding flash tore the world apart.

Chapter Eight

The House Of Dark Shadows

Tristan was tossed into the back seat of a car and driven somewhere for a long time. Duhamel was behind the wheel of an antique car that creaked and groaned every time he shifted gears or turned a corner. The vehicle sounded like it was about to fall apart.

Tristan could only pray the bucket of bolts didn't come to a screeching halt in the middle of nowhere.

Though he knew that, sooner or later, Duhamel was going to pull some dumb stunt like this, tossing a hand grenade into Isaac's apartment hadn't been on the list. Vampires had a natural aversion to traditional firearms and incendiary weapons.

When it came to wreaking havoc, for the most part, they stuck fastidiously to the "old ways."

Tristan was loath to identify with the vampire's meticulous sense of aesthetics. Yet there was no denying that he felt strangely at home with them. But the artistry of the kill was quite beyond Duhamel's comprehension. No matter his place on the totem pole, the servant exhausted himself in the service of his master and pondered nothing else.

He'd be used up and tossed aside when he became a burden. He would never be considered one of them. A lowly minion with no ambitions or wiles was in a much better place.

Tristan almost felt sorry for him.

His hands and feet were bound with multiple pairs of handcuffs and heavy shackles. Despite all his naked scorn, Duhamel was plainly afraid of him. He wouldn't try taking him on without first knocking him unconscious with a bomb.

Ridding himself of even this ball and chain barely rose to

a challenge, except that it was better to let Duhamel think he was safely unconscious. The wounds he'd suffered in the blast had already clotted on their own.

He'd lost more blood from the shrapnel—and it hurt more—than he would have guessed. But he'd made do. He could take care of Duhamel by himself. As long as Isaac could take out Jado.

Isaac.

Isaac must have noticed by now. Thanks to Duhamel's utter lack of discretion, he didn't have to worry about getting word to him. Yes, the irony. Their timing would determine the rest. Tristan closed his eyes and relaxed, preserving his remaining reserves the best he could.

Closing off the rest of the world, Tristan became distinctly aware of the aura of blood. Not his own. He'd been aware of it ever since he'd been thrown into the car. The worn and cracked black leather seat hid the evidence, but it was spotted with blood.

Probably from the human offerings Duhamel had carted off to Jado. The aroma was that of a young woman. One of the girls who'd gone missing over the past several weeks was probably among them. Had he kept his attention pinned on Duhamel, he might have been able to save some of them. The thought made his chest hurt all the more.

But finding Duhamel among the humans wasn't easy. Duhamel was more human than not and didn't stand apart. Moreover, Duhamel made a point of avoiding any contact with Tristan.

Jado had likely told him what to do and how to deport himself. Even asleep, Jado would have sensed his children disappearing one by one. And might have faintly understood who was behind it.

The sound of the tires on the road grew louder. It wasn't gravel, but well off the beaten path. Somewhere in the outskirts, where the landscape was dotted with decaying redevelopment projects awaiting renewed funding. These new suburban centers never seemed to last longer than the second generation of owners, before they gave up and moved back to the city.

In the olden days, the area was overrun with dense forests and empty fields and otherwise useless land. The non-humans lived there. Their existence threatened human life and livelihood in every particular. Perhaps that fear had etched itself into their genes and haunted their descendants as well.

The heart of the urban environment, by contrast, must feel like the eye of the hurricane to the exurban transplants. No matter how ravaging the blight, the atmosphere was calm and clear. Intermittent news reports of savage crimes only rekindled those nightmarish ancestral memories: run to the city for safety.

The vampires and their kind had already decamped from the darkness of the outskirts to the canyons of man-made darkness under skies of artificial light. The urban crime rate was greater—and the crimes more atrocious—but the attention of the world focused much less on them than on the occasional family annihilation in the countryside.

Like mysterious cattle mutilations, the cases mostly grew cold and went unsolved. The vampires who terrorized the night never showed their faces. The only evidence was the lingering echoes of their haunting laughter.

Duhamel drove down the streets like he'd been here before. The car slowed. And stopped. Clearly without any worry of being overheard, Duhamel slammed shut the driver's side door and then hauled Tristan out of the back seat.

He carried Tristan over his shoulder like a sandbag. The chains and shackles clanked like an old swing set, but Duhamel didn't seem to care. Tristan opened his eyes. The buildings around them appeared devoid of people.

Duhamel easily pushed open the door and stepped inside. It hadn't been locked. Still slung over his shoulder, Tristan glanced around the deserted hallway. He was seized by a most peculiar

sensation. A feeling of déjà vu. But that wasn't possible. It was surely only an illusion.

Duhamel dumped him on the floor at the end of the hall. Tristan played possum. Duhamel kicked him a few times to make sure.

Apparently satisfied and relieved that Tristan was still out of it, he took a key from his pocket and unlocked the small door to the side of the staircase leading to the second floor. The walls here were all finished the same, with identical wallpaper, so the door would have been invisible at first glance.

Duhamel turned back to Tristan. His mouth twisted into a look of malicious glee. He chuckled wickedly, "Your Master is waiting. This time he'll drain every last drop of blood from your body. And as a reward, I will become the first of his direct descendants." He raised his dry voice and laughed louder. "Ah, it feels so good. You were always nothing but a pretty face and a plaything, and yet the cause of so much grief for your sire. Once you are drained dry, the ghouls can have at what's left. They can start by feasting on your head. They're always hungry for more."

The laughter wheezing in his throat, Duhamel again hoisted him onto his shoulder.

At the same time, Tristan swung the heavy chains. They hit Duhamel's head with a dull thud, the impact sending him flying into the wall. Tristan shed the shackles around his ankles as simply as taking off his socks.

Duhamel crumpled to the floor, showing the whites of his eyes, his face twitching. Tristan hadn't checked his swing and Duhamel's skull was likely broken. But he wouldn't die. If left to his own devices, he would recover in time.

It took a bit longer removing the handcuffs, but Tristan could have given Harry Houdini a run for his money. He walked up to Duhamel with the restraints.

"It's not that I don't feel any sympathy for the devil, but you've killed too many already. Not for Jado, but for your own pleasure. It is too late for you to go back to being human when Jado dies. You're

in too deep. I can't have you interfering now."

Tristan wrapped the chains around Duhamel's neck. "Good night, sweet prince." He yanked on the ends of the chain with all his strength. The neck ripped in two and Duhamel's head thumped onto the floor.

Tristan tossed the chains aside and peered inside the door. Stairs led down into the darkness, as if into the depths of hell itself. But he felt it. He let out a long sigh filled with anger and resentment.

The hair pricked up on the back of his neck. Goose pimples prickled on his skin. He had no doubts in his mind: Jado was here.

Tristan wedged Duhamel's headless body against the jamb of the small door. Blood spilled from his neck and dripped down the steps into the gloom. He said under his breath, "Taste the blood of your last loyal attendant."

Tristan leaned against the wall opposite. As if Duhamel's blood had a will of its own, it gushed forth and ran down the staircase and out of sight. In time, within the deathly silence, he heard footsteps splashing on the sopping wet floor.

Isaac rode his bike like a whirlwind through the falling twilight. Past the industrial zone, the buildings grew farther apart. The streetlights grew scarce. A tall public housing building built a half-century before squatted there in the gloom like a great fallen beast, crumbling into a mountain of bricks.

The area had once been a thriving neighborhood with many inhabitants. Then the shopping centers moved out and the population began to drop. It finally turned into a ghost town. The city government had recently decided on yet another redevelopment effort.

Vivian said through his headset, "*Turn left after two more blocks.*"

The wheels of the bike sent broken pieces of brick flying. Isaac said, "Are you sure you've got the coordinates right?"

"Positive. Why?"

"Just wondering."

"*You should be coming to an old subdivision. A bunch of single-unit houses with yards. An abandoned neighborhood of the no-longer-living.*" Vivian spoke almost in jest. Isaac furrowed his brows. Vivian couldn't see him, so she continued on in the same tone. "*About as literally a ghost town as you'll find.*"

"Yeah, I know. I used to live around here."

"*You don't say—*" Vivian was startled enough to be stumped for a smarter retort.

Isaac slowed down. He lifted the visor of his helmet. The row of houses painted columns of square black shadows in the moonlight. The unpruned trees showed as much dry death as they did vibrant life. No lights glowed in the windows. None of these houses radiated that unique aura of being a home.

He felt like he was unconsciously retracing roads he'd walked down before. Before he knew it, he had arrived at the house where he used to live with his parents and his sister.

Isaac tore off his helmet. A sliver of light peeked out from between the curtained windows. "Somebody's in there."

"*Isaac—he's in there. Right where you're standing.*"

"This is my house!"

"What?"

Without waiting for a yea or nay, Isaac cut communications. He drew his gun and kicked open the front door. Yellow light spilled across the floor. Nobody challenged his presence.

A quick look confirmed that there was no one in the deserted hallway. The light came from the lit candles scattered around the rooms. Electricity had long ago ceased to flow here.

The candlelight was enough to reveal the heavy dust on the floor and the scattering of footprints recently left behind. Next to the staircase, there was something in front of the door leading down to the basement. Someone was lying there. He looked again and saw as well the black pool of blood spreading out around it.

He ran over and stopped. It was a dead body. Unconsciously, he raised his hand to his mouth. Without a head. The flesh of the severed neck was ragged and torn, like it'd been twisted and wrenched apart.

The head had rolled a short ways off. Duhamel's lifeless eyes stared into empty space. Isaac's shoulders dropped in relief.

But what was Duhamel's corpse doing here? And who killed him?

The door to the basement was open. The assailant must be hiding down there. He was about to take the first step when he glanced up. A faint sound came from the second floor. He craned his ears. The creaking sound definitely came from above, along with some muddled murmuring voices.

With muffled steps, Isaac climbed the staircase. The haunting sense of déjà vu grew stronger, as if the *him* from eight years ago and the *him* from now had become the same person.

Eight years before, he had mounted these stairs in search of his family.

His pulse raced away on its own. The veins pounded in his forehead. On the second floor was the master bedroom, the children's and guest bedrooms.

Which door had he opened first? The closest to the staircase. The children's room.

The room he shared with Isabel.

When he'd left the house that morning, Isabel was confined to her bed with the flu. So he was expecting to see her there when he returned. He had pressed some flowers in his notebook that he wanted to show her.

The brass doorknob—it'd been a lot higher back then. No, he was a lot shorter then. The white door and the dull, golden gleam of the brass—the memory was fresh in his mind, overlapped by the dull and discolored present reality like a double exposure.

The door slowly creaked open.

The brutal scene awaited him—Isabel lying in a pool of

blood—wearing her white nightdress—her pale cheeks drained of blood—her lips blue—

No, it was Tristan lying on the floor. A pajama top he recognized barely covered the upper half of his body. His legs were bare. His entire body was stained in red.

Tristan's closed eyelids quivered. A gruesome sound, a nauseating sound—the sound of a mouth eagerly lapping up blood.

Finally Isaac noticed—the man behind Tristan, cradling him in his arms, his face pressed against the nape of his neck. He raised his eyes—glowing like red rubies—and stared straight at Isaac.

The large fangs slowly pulled out of Tristan's neck. The blood welled up and trickled down his exposed chest. Tristan drew his brows together in pain.

"The twin's other half—" the vampire sneered, licking the bleeding wound. "You finally came home. I have been waiting."

"Jado—"

"Yes. I gather that you have been looking for me?"

Isaac drew his gun and aimed it. With Tristan in his arms, and hovering behind him like a shadow, the vampire chuckled.

"What the fuck are you doing here?"

"I have always been here. Rooted to this spot like I was nailed to a cross—by that twin sister of yours."

"Say what?" The barrel of the gun wavered.

Jado bared his bloodsoaked fangs and grinned. "Oh, you thought *he* did it? Alas, he never had the courage. No matter how much time passes, he cannot shed this affection for the human race, despite all the fatherly attention I have showered upon him."

"So you're the bastard—" Anger blended with relief. Tristan wasn't a mad killer after all.

"As punishment for his betrayal, I can tell you this much—it was I who did the deed. But he created the opportunity."



"What's that supposed to mean?"

"He has been offering comfort and aid to our blood enemies on the sly. Do you not know? Your mother descends from his sister's line."

"She—*what?*"

Jado gave the startled Isaac a self-satisfied look and again sank his fangs into Tristan's neck. Tristan's dazed eyes opened wide and he loosed a hoarse cry.

"Stop it!" Isaac yelled.

"Let me tell you a story from not too long ago. I am the one who made a feast of your family. Why, you ask? Because they were a finger constantly stuck in my eye."

Jado made a gaudy show of licking Tristan's neck.

"By all rights, the line should have been destroyed long ago, together with the Fontaniers. But for some reason they were overlooked. The daughter who left the city, married, and took on another name slipped our attention. Had Tristan risen from the grave as my loyal servant, all would have come to light. But the loathsome substance of our blood enemies flows in his veins. He was born with a rebellious spirit."

Jado again plunged his fangs into Tristan's rigid neck. Isaac's finger trembled on the trigger.

"He continued to defy me. When I gallantly turned the other cheek, he protected his sister Gertrude. And in gratitude, she developed that accursed vaccine. It was a mistake to count him among our number. But I did not imagine that he was one of *them*. Only that he piqued my curiosity so."

Jado raked his nails across Tristan's cheek in a cruelly loving manner. As if being stroked by a razor blade, a thin line of blood welled up.

"Enough already!" Isaac shouted.

Jado smiled thinly. "The Fontanier woman bore the blood of our enemies. I can still scarcely believe it. Fontanier annoyed me. So I destroyed him and his clan. I made the little bastard one of us on a

mere whim. To think he was a blood enemy all along! There he was, drowning in a sea of his own blood. And yet without a flicker of fear in his eyes. Those beautiful eyes stared back at me, filled with hatred and the desire for sweet revenge."

He laughed, more a deep and throaty growl.

"When humans look upon me, their eyes invariably fill with fear and despair. And that feels so good. But this one was different. He aroused my interest. I shared my blood with him. I wanted to know how he would look upon me as my servant. But wouldn't you know, he continued to be as contrary as before."

Jado tightened his grip around Tristan's body. He dug his nails into the soft flesh beneath Tristan's chin. Fresh blood flowed, soaking Jado's fingers. Tristan appeared to be completely out of it.

"And the truth finally dawned on me. He was not the typical rebellious boy. He was a blood enemy, possessing the power to destroy us. But having been turned into a vampire, he could no longer exercise that power. As a human, he may have become a first-class hunter. The life he has now is naught but suffering. What discord arises when the vampiric nature and the human heart are twined together! I cannot deny the pleasure I took in watching the conflict play out within him. My favorite toy. What a pretty feral child he makes, forever biting the hands that feed him. But I can always bring him to heel. Seeing the loathing in his eyes as I force him to bow down is particularly entertaining."

Jado again chuckled under his breath. He licked Tristan's collar. "Not a trifling accessory like this. Chained to a collar far cruder and stronger, and penned up in a cell. Humans appropriate to his taste tossed in with him, and yet he continues to forebear. But I always saw the end from the beginning. What a naked delight it is to watch my marionettes dancing on their strings. You performed so admirably, Tristan. Though lacking the courage to drink blood, you sold your body and lived on and on. You must have enjoyed it. However you may have denied your thirst, the pleasures of the body cannot be denied. Isn't that right?"

Jado whispered the vile words in his ear as he reached down between Tristan's legs. He slowly drew his hand up the blood-smeared inner thigh, making the intent and the practiced nature of the gesture all too clear.

Isaac flushed with anger. Jado narrowed his eyes and smiled. "Ah, so it seems you've tasted him as well. Was it good for you too?"

"You son of a bitch!"

Jado replied with a harsh guffaw. He got to his feet, tossing aside Tristan's body like a toothpick. Though Isaac managed to break his fall before he hit the floor, his unnaturally light and enervated body couldn't help but arouse in him a deep sense of unease.

"Tristan! Snap out of it!"

Isaac slapped his bloody cheeks. Tristan didn't respond. The skin not stained by blood was shockingly white. It was as if all the blood had drained from his body. Disregarding its gory state, Isaac pressed his ear against Tristan's chest and was able to detect a faint heartbeat.

He was alive. Isaac knelt on the floor and clasped Tristan's cold body to his own. "Don't die, Tristan! Hang in there!"

The floorboards creaked. Isaac looked up. Jado loomed over him like a black silhouette, blocking his way. Jado was taller than he'd imagined, like a towering obelisk, over six and a half feet tall. And with a rugged, muscular physique to match.

While lounging on the floor, he'd given off a thin and sickly vibe. Now a perverse vitality radiated not just from his glowing red eyes, but from his entire being.

"I'm done with him. His blood put the finishing touches on my resurrection. And with it, the last vestiges of my affection. He has eradicated my loyal children, my direct descendants. And to rub salt in that wound, wrung the neck of my poor Duhamel, who stood by my side throughout my recuperation. Though I suppose the fool deserved what he got, so grossly underestimating the power of a direct descendant."

Meaning that Tristan had killed Duhamel. Jado laughed without spite. "Well, fine. I did not expect Duhamel to accomplish anything more than bringing Tristan to me. I might have made him a direct descendant if he had only proved himself. Alas, even that proved a weight he could barely lift. Scraping together promising human candidates from scratch is an awful inconvenience, but there is no other way. The dens of our blood enemies must be exterminated. You will be the first, Isaac Blanche. What a bother you are. You and your blood enemy twin. As adults, the two of you could have posed a significant threat to our kind. Lacking your better half, though, you are merely human."

Jado's red eyes glimmered like foxfire. Isaac flew backwards and slammed against the wall. The blow knocked the breath out of him. Jado hadn't moved an inch. A faint smile rose to his lips.

Isaac just barely managed to maintain a grip of his gun. He unleashed a volley of shots.

Jado whipped his black cape around him. The wooden bullets dropped harmlessly to the floor with a small *tock—tock—tock*—

"Hawthorn. Well done. But if they don't hit me, they might as well be made of cork."

His arm slashed through the air. A fissure opened in the wall as if struck by an axe. Isaac dove to the floor and rolled, continuing to fire. Jado dodged the shots as if the laws of gravity didn't apply to him. Or batted them away with the sleeve of his cloak.

A hollow *click* as the hammer of the gun fell on an empty chamber. Isaac reached for a fresh magazine. In that time, Jado had closed the distance between them with great strides. Isaac seized the small vial. He popped off the top with his thumb and flung its contents at Jado.

The bottle smashed against the wall. The air filled with the sweet-smelling smell of roses. Jado scowled and stumbled, holding his sleeve up to his nose. "Rosewater," he spat out, as if the word itself was distasteful in his mouth. "I should wipe the planet clean of that loathsome flower."

Isaac took that momentary pause to load the magazine and fire. When it counted, he had a steady aim that impressed his instructors. The municipal SWAT team had once recruited him as a sniper. And not simply shooting from a fixed position, but moving, aiming and firing simultaneously.

Up till now, he'd dealt mostly with a class of vampires below that of minion. It was a different story when it came to higher-ups and elders. He was never going to draw a bead on this guy. Tristan was amazingly fast. Jado was faster.

The sleeve of Jado's cloak snapped like a whip, slapping the gun from Isaac's hand. Then swung around, grazing his cheek and burying itself in the wall behind him like the tip of a spear.

In the time it took Jado to yank it out, Isaac took a flying leap past his feet, pulling a knife from his right boot and flinging it at Jado's back. But it bounced off the cloak and fell to the floor.

Jado slowly turned around and fixed his eyes on Isaac. His red eyes burned like the fires of hell. Isaac swiped the metal tab in his wristband across his cheek. The skin broke and the blood welled up. Jado's gaze wavered.

It was a primitive but effective method of breaking the spell of a vampire's gaze. At times like this, the vampire's bloodlust worked against him. He couldn't ignore the flow of fresh blood.

But that only left them in a stalemate. Out of the corner of his eye, Isaac searched the floor for his gun. It was still lying next to Jado. The question was whether he could distract Jado long enough to grab it. He still had several rosewater vials left in the pack. Though short of direct application, it wouldn't much more than slow him down a tad.

Jado's speed wasn't the most dangerous thing about him. The long cape wrapped around him like a death shroud could apparently repel any ballistic object.

There probably wasn't anything unique about the fabric. As the need arose, vampires could turn human science and technology to their own uses. But what humans devised, they were wont to scorn.

More likely that Jado had instantly transformed the composition of the cloth through his own supernatural powers.

The rumor that vampires who had risen to elder status could manipulate the elements was not without substance.

Unconsciously searching his pockets at the same time, Isaac chanced upon an object. Ascertaining its shape, he pulled it out and kicked it across the floor.

The flashbang grenade exploded at Jado's feet. The gun skittered across the floor. Isaac dove to the ground. Just as his fingers reached the grip, a sharp impact struck him in the side and sent him flying against the wall.

The shadow rose up, illuminated up by the white magnesium glare. The light blazed around him like a corona, casting Jado's figure into a dark silhouette.

Jado bared his glittering fangs and sneered. "Fool. You think these eyes can be dazzled so easily? Close my eyes and shut my ears and I could still read you like a book."

The black shadow raced toward him. The dull blows continued. Isaac lay sprawled on the floor as Jado kicked him in the chest. His bones creaked. The breath rushed out of him. The hard leather of Jado's boot pressed against his throat, jamming him into the corner between the floor and wall.

Isaac tried to wrench the boot aside. Jado chortled and increased the weight. He was like a butterfly pinned alive to a collector's board. He struggled frantically. The blood pounded in his veins. A banging inside his skull like a gong. Jado's laughter in his ringing ears.

"Such a pity. Your sister had such power in her. It took me eight years to recuperate from the wounds she inflicted upon me. Though she was the one who ended up dead."

In the flickering dark world, Isabel's innocent smile glittered in his eyes like a ray of sunlight. *Isaac, tell me all about it when you come home.*

"Isabel, you stood up to Jado—"

"Taking such a young girl for granted was an error on my part. I learn from my mistakes. On the verge of death, I watched her awaken to her true powers and tear out half of my heart. She would have taken the other half were she not almost dead from the loss of blood."

Isabel—

Inside his thoughts, her ocean-blue eyes sparkled. His sister laughed.

Isaac—

Isabel called to him. A cheerful voice. A peevish voice. A sad voice. Isabel's voice echoed through his thoughts, reflecting all the emotions of the rainbow.

"What I'd expect of our blood enemy. She threw my heart into the fireplace before I could get it back. The pain was indeed like being burned alive in the flames of hell. And I was doomed to remain grounded to this place until I recovered. How damnably annoying."

The infuriated Jado slammed his boot against Isaac's neck. "As it turns out, this might well have been the perfect place to lie low. As the old saying goes, it is darkest at the base of the lighthouse."

He peered down at the subject of his torture and smiled with malicious delight. "Yes, I have secluded myself in the basement of this house the whole time. It takes so very little to make humans ignore what is right before their eyes. A little vampire killing makes the rest steer clear. This neighborhood has become a haunted land. New territory for us. There are worse places to nap. As I had fallen into a deep sleep, nobody could find me. Not my direct descendants, and certainly not Tristan. It was my good fortune that he spent all his time looking for me in the wrong places. Though he did eradicate my children. What a troublesome boy he is. And yet he has proved most valuable in the end."

Jado leaned over and drew the sword from the scabbard strapped to Isaac's back.

"I imagine you were going to send me to an ignominious death

with this. Even though you are at less than half strength without your better half, your continuing fragment of a life is a blot on mine. If all the hunters in the world were happy enough to spend their days dispatching replaceable minions to the great beyond, I would have little to complain about. They've barely the skill to attack us in our sleep. Dirty little rats. I shall skewer you with your own sword and toss your corpse onto the steps of the Helsing Group. A wake-up call to the doddering old fools running that asylum."

Jado took a step back. Isaac didn't move. His body was wracked by a fit of coughing that seemed to shake every bone in his body to pieces. The pain brought tears to his eyes.

"Yes, better you die full of regrets."

In a dramatic and theatrical manner, Jado raised the sword high to the ceiling. Isaac instinctually closed his eyes.

A small, dry sound echoed in his ears.

Brandishing the sword over his head, Jado froze in mid-motion, his crimson eyes bulging out. He expelled a wheezing breath, and then hacked out a great spout of blood.

"What the—"

Jado's eyes filled with mad confusion. Isaac didn't get it himself. The flare from the flashbang flickered out. The candlelit gloom again suffused the room, followed by a strange quiet.

Isaac's attention focused past Jado. "Tristan!"

Tristan had been lying on the floor, sapped of strength. Now he sat up, the upper half of his torso painted red, the blood-drenched pajama top hanging from one shoulder. A small hole had appeared in his half-exposed chest.

He was holding Isaac's gun. He spat out a mouthful of blood. Twin red lines trailed from the corners of his mouth. He laughed with fearless eyes.

"Have you forgotten, Jado? All those other times I met fates worse than death? Thanks to the years of tempering at your hands, a bit of roughhousing like this would hardly kill me."

Jado finally turned and looked where Isaac was looking.

"Tristan—you bastard!" He twisted his body unnaturally and clenched his teeth.

"Having taken so much of my blood, you and I are now linked."

"Traitor! This was your plan from the start!"

"Of course. What, do you think I would have offered even one drop of my blood otherwise? I would rather be drawn and quartered."

Terrible scorn burned like a flame in his black eyes. The infuriated Jado stepped toward him. Tristan turned the gun against his own thigh and pulled the trigger. Jado dropped the sword and crashed to the floor, grimacing in agony.

Tristan smiled knowingly. "Hurts, huh? It's not your body actually being injured, but the pain is very real."

Without a moment's hesitation, Tristan shot his other leg. The undisguised flinch of pain that rose to his face made Isaac shout, "Tristan, stop it!"

"We've come too far to start retreating now." Tristan smiled through the pain. "We've finally got him where we want him."

The reports from the gun continued without respite. Red holes appeared in Tristan's sides and chest. Like a perverse body double, each time Jado cried out in anger and agony and rolled on the floor.

"That's enough, Tristan!"

Tristan slumped against the wall and smiled weakly. He pressed the barrel of the gun against his chest, over his heart. "Isaac. The sword. Cut off his head. He can be killed."

"Stop it!"

A muddled sound and a scream overlapped. The gun slipped from Tristan's hand and hit the floor with a dry, hollow sound. The tears pouring down his cheeks mingled with the blood, forming a pink sheen. His obsidian eyes fell on Isaac. In his ears, inside his head, Isaac heard the murmuring voice.

"Take up the sword."

In a daze, as if being guided by unseen hands, Isaac picked the

sword up off the floor. He popped the tops of the remaining vials in his pack and spilled the contents over the flat of the blade. The smell of roses filled the air, for a moment displacing the permeating odor of blood.

Jado lay on the floor, staring up at the ceiling, his quivering lips and eyes wide open. His rigid tongue protruded from his mouth. His bloody fangs gleamed against the sickening pallor of his face.

Isaac raised the sword. Drops of rosewater splattered onto Jado's face. The flesh burned. Jado's screams dissolved into incoherent noise. A sound like a gurgling sewer issued from his throat.

The sword arced down. The blade bit into the floorboards. The head skittered around and around and into a corner of the room. And flopped over. The sharp fangs jutted from his twisted mouth. White smoke smoldered from the severed neck.

The final vestiges of life slowly drained from its disbelieving eyes.

Isaac jerked the sword out of the wood. The recoil landed him on his ass. He stared hard at the bloody, gory metal. Then coming to his senses with a start, he cast the sword aside and scrambled to his feet.

"Tristan!"

Tristan was leaning against the wall, his head slumped against his chest. Isaac ran over to him and wrapped his arms around him. Tristan opened his eyes and smiled wanly. "It's okay. I'm alive. I did promise you, after all."

"Idiot!" Isaac shouted at him. "What was all that bullshit about you killing my family?"

Tristan cast his eyes downward. "I didn't think you would have come through otherwise."

He tried to laugh and it turned to a fit of coughing. Isaac hugged him tightly. "I swear. What a fucking idiot!"

"Ah, but dying like this isn't the worst thing. Dying in your lover's arms—"

The word *dying* struck his senses like a bullet to the brain. Isaac blanched. But Tristan said with an innocent smile, "All's well that ends well, as Shakespeare put it. Thank you, Isaac. I'm sorry—"

He patted Isaac's back reassuringly, pats barely stronger than the flap of a butterfly's wings, ready to drop lifeless at his side at any moment. Isaac acted before he'd completely processed the thought.

Isaac bit hard into his own wrist, tearing the flesh open. He pressed the bleeding wound to Tristan's mouth. "Drink!" he practically shouted in his ear.

The exhausted Tristan opened his eyes in surprise. Isaac's anger dissolved into a groan of impatience as he tightened his hold around Tristan.

"You can't jerk people around like that and then go and conveniently die before getting called on it! Not if I have anything to say about it! Now, drink!" He again pressed the wound to Tristan's lips, clenching his teeth to stand the throbbing pain. "You can explain yourself later, but now I'm telling you to drink!"

Tristan plied his shivering tongue to the skin, licking up the dripping red drops. Little by little, the light returned to his lifeless eyes. He finally took hold of Isaac's wrist with both hands and after a moment's hesitation, sucked at the gash.

The pain from the self-inflicted laceration diminished bit by bit, until only a warm, numb throbbing remained. Tristan drank with unfeigned zeal. The pulsing of his white throat was strangely arousing.

Isaac looked on without fear or awe, only a kind of idle wonder when Tristan had finished drinking. This feeling was accompanied by no sense of dread. He was only glad that his blood had helped to sustain him.

That, and a great sense of satisfaction. A sharing of souls more rewarding than any physical pleasures—that brought Tristan closer to him than when they were physically joined together—so much so that he felt that the two of them were an indivisible whole.

He could not say where the one ended and the other began. He would not object to dying like this. Or rather, he did not object to the desire. To sleep, perchance to dream. Everything dissolved and blended together, melding into a fulfilling universe of oneness. Ah, his kingdom for a pleasant nap.

That wish was granted. The gentle night crept in and enfolded Isaac in its fond and familiar downy wings.

Epilogue

Love At First Bite

Vivian sighed.

“My God, you are as bullheaded as a mule.”

Isaac couldn't tell from her tone of voice whether she was exasperated or actually impressed. He sat up on the bed, and leaned back against the pillow and glared back at her. “Excuse me for being stubborn.”

He sounded hoarse even to his ears. Jado's boot on his throat had given him the equivalent of a bad case of laryngitis. His neck was wrapped with bandages. There was a surgical dressing beneath his right eye and bruises around his mouth.

“I meant it as a compliment.”

She sat on the folding chair next to the bed and gracefully crossed her legs. Her garter peeked out from the slit in the tight skirt. Isaac shrugged. The woman was a nonstop cock tease.

“I mean, considering the beating you took, you haven't so much as a cracked bone or a broken rib.”

“Yeah, ignoring the bruises covering every inch of my body. And the blood loss.”

“Blood loss? More like a blood donation. That you could survive a vampire drinking your blood in that condition is the real miracle.”

Isaac looked down at his right wrist. Like his neck, it was tightly encased in bandages.

“You didn't consider the risk of being infected?”

“I didn't exactly have the time to do a cost-benefit analysis. He was at death's door.”

“Go on leaping before you look, and odds are you'll find

yourself taking a long walk off a short pier someday soon. So, what's it like siring a vampire?"

"Hell if I know," said Isaac, averting his gaze.

He could hardly believe how things had turned out either. Tristan should have died along with his sire and elder, Jado. Except that Tristan had absorbed Isaac's blood, replacing Jado's, and continued to live. But in the process, Isaac had made himself Tristan's sire.

Despite being human.

The first time Professor Hopkins visited and informed him of this fact, he thought they were playing a bad practical joke on him.

The professor gravely shook his head. "We've never seen this before. When it comes to vampires, what we still don't know could fill volumes. All we can say for certain is that a direct descendant has survived after killing his sire. The odds of that happening are slim to none in any event. But we have observed small gaps between the death of the sire and the death of the direct descendant. Think of injury time in soccer. Play continues even after the game ends."

"Injury time."

"It's only a metaphor. If, during that gap, a person were to offer his blood and not die from anemia, he would become the master, taking the place of the previous sire. But when it comes to a vampire *in extremis*, there's no way to exercise any kind of control over the variables involved. It's certainly not a strategy I would bet my life on. You were lucky. That he was a very unusual vampire to start with probably has something to do with it."

After some small talk, Hopkins said he'd visit again with his wife, and then left. Vivian came in as he was leaving, carrying a big bouquet of roses in both hands. She planted them in a vase by the window. The burst of color brightened the sterile hospital room. A faint perfume filled the air.

"This species doesn't have much of a scent. This is only a get-well visit, after all. We don't want your allergies acting up."

Vivian grinned. It was hard to tell whether she was truly

worried about him, or simply curious. They chatted about this and that.

"I hear raising a vampire is tough. How's your taste for liver?"

"I made him promise he wouldn't drink blood again."

"Miser."

"Doing shit like that could kill you!" Isaac's exasperated exclamation dissolved into a hoarse hack.

"Hey, hey. Don't shout like that. You'll lose what's remaining of your voice."

"Then quit yanking my chain," said Isaac, feeling his throat and giving Vivian a look.

Once he'd regained a sane grip on his senses, the greatest peril Isaac felt wasn't the risk of dying from the blood loss, but from that state of consciousness, which had been as strange and mysterious as it was pleasurable. He could easily imagine himself dying while in its grip. Tristan understood this too, which is why he calmly nodded and made no objections when Isaac stated that there wouldn't be a second time.

"With you in the hospital as well, the Helsing Group hunter division is open for business but nobody's home. Get better soon. Your wounds are the least severe of all of them."

"That's all we are to you—sponges to squeeze until they're wrung dry."

"Idiot. I mean the place is a drag without you."

Vivian got to her feet and flashed him a suggestive wink. "It's not fun teasing anybody else around there."

"It's not my purpose in life to be your plaything."

Vivian opened the door and waved.

"Bye-bye. See you later."

"I won't wait up!" Isaac rejoined as loudly as he could.

He couldn't even be bothered to throw a pillow at her. His throat felt like sandpaper. While rubbing his neck, he reached for a glass of water. The glass was placed in his hand. At some point,

Tristan had returned. "Yelling like that can't be good for your voice."

"That woman is a constant pain in the ass," Isaac whispered loudly, though it sounded more like an excuse than a complaint.

"She's worried about you."

"Naw, she just came by to play."

Tristan smiled wryly, and returned the glass to the bedside table.

"Where'd you go?"

"I was talking with the professor."

"Cutting another backroom deal?"

"Nothing like that," Tristan answered with a perplexed smile.

"You've become awfully suspicious of late."

"And whose fault is that?"

Tristan sat on the edge of the bed and kissed Isaac's pouting lips. Isaac gave him a sidelong glance. "Just don't go wandering off on your own like that."

"I won't," Tristan murmured.

As a sign of his vow, the next kiss lingered longer. His soft black eyes smiled down at him. They exchanged many more intimate kisses. Wrapping his arms around his lovely back, Isaac sighed and said, "I don't get it."

Relaxing into the embrace, Tristan raised his head and asked curiously, "Get what?"

"There you were, on the verge of death. And here you are, lively as a rabbit. Why am I the one confined to this bed?"

"That's just the way it is. The subject has been studied over and over. It takes longer for humans like yourself to recuperate. And I did receive quite a donation of blood from you." He wrapped his arms around Isaac's neck and whispered in a mischievous voice, "I'll make up for it later."

The provocative look in his eye made Isaac gulp despite himself.

Tristan brought his lips close to Isaac's ear and added, "Or we

could settle accounts here and now."

"I-I don't think the setting's exactly appropriate—"

"That only adds to the thrill, no?"

His hands dove beneath the blankets. Flustered, Isaac grabbed them. "I think it'd be better after I'm released from the hospital."

"No need to play hard to get."

"There is for the time being," he said, eyes frantically checking the door.

Tristan giggled. "You are an unusually sensible man, Isaac."

"And you are unusually lacking in it," Isaac hissed, pushing Tristan's hands away. Tristan managed not to look put-out. He snuggled against Isaac. Despite worrying about what it'd look like if a nurse or well-wisher came in at that moment, the closeness and affection was warmly pleasant.

As if reading his mind, Tristan murmured in his ear, "Even if it's not on your mind, nobody will be visiting for a while. Rounds aren't for two more hours. And I hung out the *No Visitors* sign."

"You little—"

"But I wanted to be together with you, just the two of us."

Tristan looked at Isaac from beneath his brows. He looked for all the world like a sulking, neglected cat. Not neglected on purpose. To start with, Isaac was spending this time in the hospital because of all the blood he'd given up to pull Tristan back from the brink of death.

Except that Isaac wasn't going to say that out loud. He took a deep breath instead. When Tristan turned those eyes on him, he felt like he'd lost before the game had even started.

"Well, they'll release you from the hospital in another two or three days. I guess I can soldier on for a little while longer."

So why I am responsible for keeping him in a good mood? Isaac thought. At the same time, he was surprised at how off-putting it *wasn't*. Like taking in a cute and willful kitten, who had in turn proceeded to take over the house. He was supposedly the cat's owner, but at some point they'd traded roles.

Light kisses gave way to tongues entwining. Isaac panicked a bit and—a tad forcefully—tore Tristan's lithe body off him. Tristan looked more surprised than angry. He looked back at Isaac, wet lips parted.

Whether consciously or unconsciously, a dizzying scent wafted up. If conscious, it would take all he had to handle it. If unconscious, it'd make matters even worse. Vampires really were the most seductive creatures under heaven.

"There's something I need to ask you," he asked as bluntly as he could, perhaps trying to hide his embarrassment.

Tristan licked the corners of his mouth and grinned. "What?"

"I take it I am your sister Gertrude's descendant. That true?"

"It's true. You are her great-grandchild. Your mother is the daughter of Gertrude's daughter. Because they took their husbands' names, it wasn't immediately obvious."

"So you've known about me all along? Before Isabel was killed?"

"I've known since you were born, about all of Gertrude's children. Though I didn't develop personal relationships with them, I did observe them. I've known about your connection to the Helsing Group. The mausoleum where your family is interred was originally the Fontanier burial plot. After they were killed, ownership of the mausoleum was ceded to the Helsing Group. Gertrude and her daughter were interred there."

"Ah, yes. Sorry about before. Nothing wrong with visiting your own grave."

Tristan placed his hand over Isaac's. "That's okay. Your anger was entirely understandable."

"But it wasn't you."

"I truly couldn't save them." He drew his brows and squeezed Isaac's hand. "Turned into a vampire and with my family dead, my first priority was Gertrude's survival. Protecting her was my only objective. I would have otherwise ended this accursed life myself."

"Tristan—"

Tristan smiled a small smile and kissed him. "When Jado killed my mother and sister, I thought the family line of the Chevalier was at an end. My older sister had moved away ten years before. She slipped Jado's attention. That's why I raised hell, bit the hand that sired me, and made sure his undivided attention was on me. Still, I couldn't hide the fact forever—that Gertrude and her progeny survived and the lineage of their blood enemies continued. If I was capable of dying, Jado would have tortured me to death. But he did leave me close enough to death that I could not reach your family in time."

"So the ones you wanted to protect and save were my mother and sister, not me." The Chevalier could only continue through the maternal line. Even if Isaac possessed the necessary genes, he could not pass them on to his own son or daughter.

Isaac noticed the wounded expression on Tristan's face and realized the implications of what he was saying. "Ah, no, I didn't mean to suggest that you didn't care about me. It's just that I understand the priorities."

Tristan took out the locket and chain and hung it around Isaac's neck. "Isabel was holding this in her hand. I took it for safekeeping, intending to return it to you when the time came. As you were Gertrude's last surviving heir, with your help, I resolved to end things once and for all."

"You should have said so from the start, you know. But why go to such lengths? Why'd you keep these cards hidden up your sleeve the whole time?"

"You don't know?"

"You came at me like a blind left hook."

"Ah, that—" Tristan said with a thin smile. "Because I figured it'd be easier to motive you out of loathing."

"What!"

"I wasn't sure I could instill in you the proper motivation to kill Jado. If you thought you were doing me a favor, you might hold back, perhaps? I hadn't planned on sleeping with you. The truth is,

when you said no, I was really thrown for a loop."

"So you made up that lie?"

"Yeah." Tristan's shoulders slumped. "There was that, and right at that moment, I found myself in a real state of despair."

"What, you enjoyed it too, didn't you? Or was it all an act?"

"No, not at all. When we were doing it, I suddenly wanted to drink your blood." He hung his head and fidgeted bashfully.

Isaac scowled. "Isn't that in the vampire's instinct?"

"But I hadn't ever felt that way before. Even if it felt good, it didn't trigger a literal bloodlust. It convinced me that there might be a drop of humanity left in me, and that was really important to me."

"It feeling good, you mean."

Tristan's cheeks flushed and turned away. "That's—that's why I said what I did."

"Like I would have believed you if you'd just tossed it off like a throwaway line."

"Maybe if I'd said it more disingenuously—"

"I wonder." Isaac cocked his head to the side. "Considering the circumstances, that would have been more than enough to make me blow my top."

"Well, then I should have said that."

"Hey, you wanted to piss me off that much?"

Tristan clung to him hard. "I wanted you to kill Jado more than anything. I knew I couldn't do it by myself. I was convinced I needed somebody to do my dirty work for me. You were to be my instrument of revenge."

Isaac quietly stroked Tristan's back. With a half-cough, half-sob, Tristan said, "Forgive me."

"For what?"

"For using you like that?"

Isaac laughed hoarsely. "The same pretty much applies to me, doesn't it? It seems we ended up in the same boat together, despite ourselves."

Tristan raised his head. But before he could open his mouth, Isaac pressed his lips against Tristan's. They exchanged kisses. Isaac stroked his cheek. His finger trailed down to the nape of his neck, where he encountered the hard leathery ring.

"You're still wearing this?" Half-hidden by his high collar, the black leather choker around his slender neck.

"Oh. I forgot."

In an entirely unconcerned manner, Tristan began to play with the buckle. Flustered, Isaac broke in, "Hold on a second!"

Tristan didn't. He undid the collar and tossed it aside. And his head stayed on his shoulders. Isaac was the one who gaped in disbelief.

"A mock-up," Tristan said nonchalantly.

Isaac slumped lifelessly to the bed. Tristan picked up the collar and twirled it around on his finger. "What, you thought it was real?"

"Of course I did! That's not funny!"

"But believing it gave you peace of mind."

"Exactly the opposite, you idiot."

"That switch really is a cigarette lighter," Tristan added with an innocent grin.

Isaac turned away in a pout. "Man, I can't believe in anything anymore! Everybody's trying to pull the wool over my eyes!"

"The professors aren't bad people. It was all my decision. In exchange for us hunting down Jado, they promised to keep mum on the subject."

"You really can't trust me? You still think of me as a kid?"

"You needn't take it so personally." Tristan cozied up to him.

Isaac glared at him out of the corner of his eye. "No more secrets."

"None. No need to have any. Right?"

His warm black eyes filled with gentle laughter. Soothingly, apologetically, Tristan kissed his cheeks. A honey-like luster rose to his eyes.

He said in a husky voice, "Still don't want to?"

"What are you asking a person in my condition for? I hurt all over."

"We can sleep together just like this."

"Hey, I said to wait until I'm out of the hospital."

"I can't wait."

"Do vampires possess any self-control? You already took most of my blood the other day."

"I needed that to heal my wounds."

Tristan's hand stole into Isaac's shorts. The fresh stimulation made him start. Tristan nipped playfully at the bandages wrapped around Isaac's neck.

"Hey, no more blood for you."

"Just a sip? It tastes so good."

"No way," Isaac shot back. "I'm not giving up being a hunter. It doesn't matter whether it's the wrist or the neck."

"And the places you can't see?"

He stroked the inside of Isaac's thigh. The sensation made Isaac squirm and his hairs prick up. "N-no, I said. T-this goes to a hunter's character."

Not to mention it was a threat to his life. The pleasure that overwhelmed him when Tristan drank his blood was like nothing he'd ever felt before. Get used to it and everything else would pale in comparison—including sex. He'd gained some understanding of those who risked life and limb to have a vampire suck their blood.

"That's okay. Devote less attention to your character and more to your nether regions."

"That pretty mouth of yours has a habit of saying vulgar things."

With raised brows, Tristan covered Isaac's protesting mouth with his own, while petting those nether regions with lascivious intent.

Isaac growled deep in his throat. "Goddamned horny vampire."

"You said I was pretty."

"I said you had a pretty mouth."

"Not just my mouth."

"You happy to have any part of you called pretty?"

"When you say it," he replied, without a hint of pretense. And then reddened slightly. He narrowed his eyes and licked his lips. "Say it."

"You're pretty."

Indeed. Once that thought had formed in his mind, the jig was up. Caught off guard when the beautiful and capricious kitten snuggled up to him, less the catcher than the caught.

And then there were those who said a cat was never anybody's pet. It was always the other way around. It seemed a funny joke once. Not so much lately.

"An ill-tempered cat," Isaac grumbled to himself.

Tristan laughed and buried his face against his neck.

You know what, Isaac? It's really tough keeping your basic instincts in check. Not to mention that I've tasted your fresh, healthy, perfectly delicious blood. The sweet grooves and strong beat of the blood flowing through your body is its own kind of symphony.

My God, but it makes me giddy. Your scent sends me into a trance. Your tongue makes me tingle. Being so close and yet having to forbear is its own kind of torture!

I'm turning into a junkie for your love. But I must keep my promises. Because my master has commanded me.

*But can I keep doing so forever? Because one day soon—
—I want to bite you.*

Afterword

A long time ago (well, 1991), a movie was released in Japan called *I Want to Bite You*. Does anybody remember it? The vampire was played by Ken Ogata. It's been a while since I saw it, so I only vaguely remember the plot. But I loved the to-the-point title. And it was somehow a little erotic, too.

So as an homage, I've done a bit of borrowing here.

Speaking of movies, I've been a longtime fan of the so-called "Bloodsucking Series" of horror films, starting with *Bloodsucking Doll* (1970). Yeah, it's something of an obsession, vampire films. Old-school ones, modern versions, futuristic interpretations—I like all of them. Vampires have unusual powers of adaptation.

My favorites remain the baroque and Byronesque dinner-jacket-wearing vampire princes. But that's a topic for another day. This time around, I took up the challenge presented by Hollywood's recent foray into action-oriented and cybergoth vampires.

So, how did I do? I like keeping tabs on the goth subculture, so I enjoyed writing it into the story, and would be more than delighted if you did too. It was fun imagining the outfits I dressed Vivian and Elvira in. Now I've got a thing for corsets! My current goal is to get my hands on a smart-looking one (even if only for practical purposes).

Speaking of this story, it started with a sexy, pretty and coquettish young vampire. From this came Tristan and his "victim," Isaac. Tristan inspired the names for Isaac and Vivian—they all came from King Arthur (though the story itself has nothing to do with the legend of King Arthur). Of the elders, I only named Jado. But Gedo, Mudo, and Gokudo would logically follow (they're the names of popular professional wrestlers in Japan).

Thinking up names is always tough. Even if I end up never using them, it's fun playing around with their sources and meanings.

Of course, the relevancy of the title becomes clear at the end, as Tristan's instincts begin to surface. There's a horror flavor to the ending as well—as well as a lovey-dovey one, natch. I suspect Isaac's resolve is balanced in a similarly precarious state. Their relationship will henceforth only get more charged and more dangerous.

My bad, I guess.

As you might have already guessed, the chapter headings are taken from popular vampire movies. (Though they're probably different from the translated titles used in Japan.)

And for those of you who read afterwords first, please enjoy the rest of the story, along with Chigusa Kawai's wonderful illustrations.